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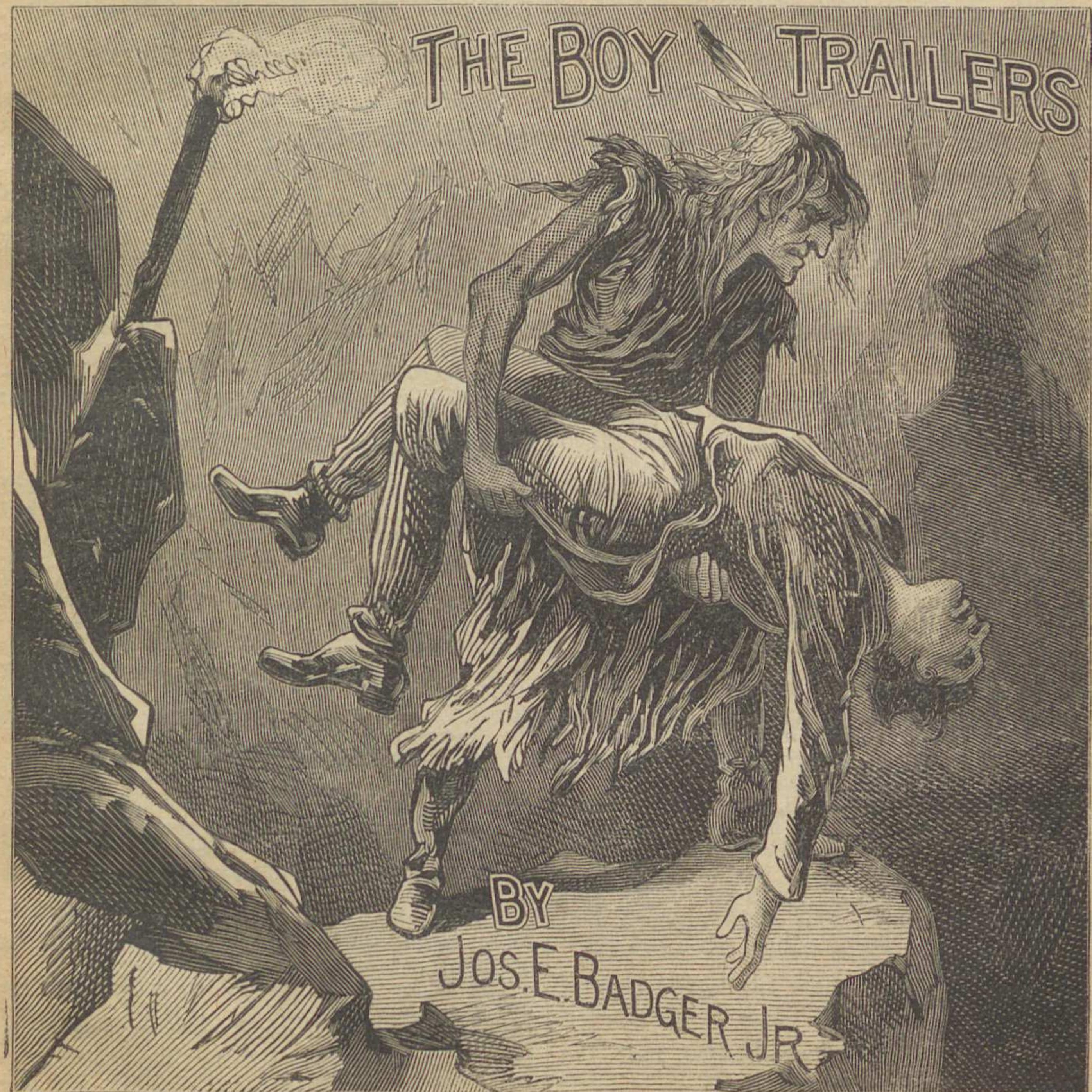
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WITH A FRIGHTFUL LAUGH, THE INDIAN WITCH THRUST DAINTY LANCE HEADLONG INTO THE
WILD BEAST DEN!

The Boy Trailers;

OR,

Dainty Lance on the War-Path.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "DEADLY DASH," "THE BLACK
GIANT," "PANTHER PAUL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A FOREST AMAZON.

"KIVER—that's some o' the p'izen imps ahead!"

These words were uttered in a warning whisper, without the speaker's turning his head toward his solitary companion. At the same moment both of the young men crouched low down amid the gray rocks, grasping their rifles, and listening intently for the outcry that would naturally announce their discovery.

But none such came. Faint sounds could be heard coming from the little valley below and beyond them, but as the moments passed by without these growing louder or more distinct, the young trailer began to believe that they had taken cover in time to avoid a discovery.

With a warning flutter of one hand behind him, the youth who had spoken cautiously moved forward until he could peer out upon the valley through a chink between two rough boulders. A moment he remained thus, eagerly drinking in the strange scene below, then turned his head and motioned his comrade to advance.

"Fun alive!" he muttered, with a subdued chuckle. "A hull circus, all to our own selves!"

His curiosity fully aroused, the taller of the two trailers pressed forward to the loop-hole, while his comrade sought out another. And truly it was a remarkable scene they were peering down upon.

Not more than two hundred yards from the pile of rocks where they lay concealed, a noble specimen of humanity was boldly meeting the vigorous assault of four huge wolves, with only the weapons that nature provided.

Now singly in swift succession the ferocious-looking animals would leap forward, only to be grasped in mid-air by the forest athlete and hurled aside like so many kittens; now making the attack in concert, growling, snarling, clashing their long teeth together, a hairy circle closing in upon the Indian, whose destruction appeared inevitable. But as often were they foiled. With motions so swift that the eye could hardly follow them, the red gladiator scattered the huge beasts; with a strength that seemed supernatural, they were grasped and hurled far aside, clashing their teeth and howling as in baffled fury.

"Injun or not, ain't he a two-legged beauty, Lance? An' don't he han'le them pesky critters han'some?"

"And fighting them bare-handed, too! I'm afrai'l they'll prove too much for him, unless we—"

"Which we won't nur cain't do," doggedly interposed the other, whom the reader may

have recognized as Hardy Zeph. "'Tain't only our own skelps—that's the little gal Sibyl—an' ef the p'izen critters once git wind o' our bein' in these parts, good-by to all chaints o' helpin' her!"

To those who may have followed the fortunes of our boy heroes, through the preceding novels of the "Dainty Lance" series, the present situation requires little explanation, but for the benefit of new patrons of the LIBRARY, a brief retrospection at this point will not come amiss.

While engaged in trapping, Dainty Lance and Har'ly Zeph became involved in a strange series of adventures, with the Mountain Vultures, a band of renegade trappers, under command of Dirk Weeninx and Ham Toplong; a mysterious recluse, the Mad Hermit, his daughter Sibyl, and a gigantic negro called Hercules.

As an almost natural consequence, Dainty Lance and Sibyl fell in love with each other. The hermit appeared to consent to their betrothal, but treacherously drugged the young trappers, and fled with Sibyl and Hercules.

On recovering from what was intended to be a death stupor the boys found an unfinished note written by Sibyl, that gave them the needed clew. She believed her father contemplated a retreat to the village of an Indian chief who was his friend, among the Plain Crees. Here the note abruptly ended, but Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph at once acted upon the partial information, though they lost much time in their vague search; so much that it was now early spring, and yet they had learned nothing definite of the missing maiden.

She might be close at hand, or might be hundreds of miles away; but one thing was certain: they were in the haunts of a bold, cruel, ferocious enemy, discovery by whom would mean imminent peril, if not death.

Yet this knowledge would not have prevented the two young men from hastening to the aid of the unarmed Indian had only their own lives been at stake. But to do so would seriously endanger their chances of rescuing Sibyl, and with painfully strong emotions they watched the strange drama in the valley below them.

Minute after minute passed, and still the Indian fought back the snarling beasts, hurling them aside with apparent ease and untiring muscles. And with the passage of each minute the interest of the hidden spectators increased.

"It's durned queer!" muttered Hardy Zeph, scratching his head, with an air of perplexity creeping over his strongly marked features. "That critter must be a iron man, or else them wolves hev got false teeth that they're afeard o' sp'ilin'. They hain't drawed blood yit, so fur as I kin see—"

"And look at those wolves—each one of a different species—who ever saw them all hunt in company before?" uttered Dainty Lance.

The leader and largest of the wolves, at that distance, looked jet black. It stood more than three feet high, and would measure over seven feet from tip to tip. But a trifle smaller was the second, a white wolf. The third was the common gray mountain-wolf; the fourth and last being that rare animal, a spotted wolf.

The habitual haunts of these animals are wide-

ly separated, and to see them here, uniting in their assaults upon the athlete, doubled the wonder of the young trailers.

"Looks like a menadgery hed bu'sted up here, an' that thar is the king o' the beasts, tamin' his show-critters!"

"Great Scott! look at that—a woman!"

The words broke from the lips of Dainty Lance in a tone louder than was prudent, but the discovery that called them forth was enough to excuse this.

Until now, the athlete had stood with back toward the curious spectators. The long, straight black hair, encircled by a fillet of feathers; the tunic of buckskin, ornamented with fringes, beads and silk embroidery; the leggings and moccasins of the same material, added to the bronzed neck and bare arms, proclaiming the Indian, naturally led the trailers to believe the athlete a man. But now, as a fierce attack of the wolves caused the athlete to turn half-way round, the full, swelling bust of a woman was clearly outlined against the gray rocks of the ledge beyond!

Both of the lads believed that incautious exclamation had been overheard, for the strange woman raised her right hand, the four wolves crouching down before her like so many playful cats. She glanced keenly around, and then her gaze seemed to settle upon the very rocks behind which the pale-faces crouched.

Fearful, not for themselves, but for Sibyl, the young trailers lay still as death, watching the forest amazon, rapidly reflecting what course they should pursue. But, fortunately, perhaps, they were not put to the test. The woman discovered nothing to confirm her suspicions, and as her admirably trained wolves made no sign, she clearly believed herself mistaken.

At a motion of her hand, the wolves resumed their antics, though with a difference. Guided alone by her gestures, they performed an infinity of maneuvers as graceful as curious, the young trailers watching the strange scene with deep interest.

But there was a difference with them, too, especially Hardy Zeph. His eyes were riveted upon the Wolf Queen, a burning light in them that spoke stronger than words. Like most unlearned persons, he was more powerfully attracted by physical than mental superiority, and the superb development of the Wolf Queen was swiftly taking him captive.

Even at that distance Zeph could see that she was of uncommon beauty for an Indian, and as he beheld her face more clearly, he began to believe that there was white blood flowing in her veins.

A low, warning hiss from the lips of Dainty Lance checked his further scrutiny, and turning his head, he saw an anxious shade crossing the face of his chum.

"Look down the valley!" he muttered in a guarded tone. "There's mischief brewing—and the sooner we skin out of this, the better for our scalps!"

Keen-eyed Zeph quickly discovered a number of footmen cautiously stealing up the valley, keeping their advance covered as much as possible by taking advantage of the thickly scattered rocks and stunted evergreens.

"Tain't fer us—they're goin' fer the gal yender. Four reds an' three whites—we kin lick 'em with *her* help!"

"You forget Sibyl—to do anything, we must keep our presence here concealed from everybody."

"You kin go, ef you like," and there was a sullen earnestness in the words such as Zeph had never before shown toward his heart brother. "They mean mischief to that gal-critter, an' I'm goin' to help her all I know how."

Dainty Lance knew that remonstrance would be useless. When once set in his notion, Zeph was as stubborn as a mule.

He would not desert his comrade, but with a few hurried words, made him promise not to interfere unless their aid was absolutely necessary, for Sibyl's sake. And then, with ready rifles, they waited and watched.

Unluckily for the plans of the oncreeping foe, the faint breeze blew directly up the valley, and the keen-nosed wolves began to betray uneasiness long before the enemy were within rifle range. Their actions warned the Wolf Queen, and leaping upon a point of rocks, she gazed keenly down the valley.

Only a moment thus. She caught sight of the enemy, who discovered the fact at the same moment, and abandoning any further attempt at concealment, they charged up the valley with wild yells and hoarse shouts.

The Wolf Queen turned to her trained animals, and spoke to them sharply, waving her hand toward the north.

With long, mournful howls, they sped away in the indicated direction, swiftly vanishing among the rocks.

The Wolf Queen caught up a long bow and well-filled quiver of arrows that lay near, having evidently been discarded to leave her movements untrammelled while playing with her fierce pets, but she gave no token of an intention to seek safety in flight. Instead, she nimbly mounted to a ledge of rocks some ten feet above the level of the valley, kneeling behind a long boulder and rapidly stringing her bow.

Rapid as were her motions, the enemy were within a hundred yards ere the bow was strung, but their advance was abruptly checked as she arose from behind the rocky barricade, an arrow fitted to the string and threatening them as she uttered a few sharp words in the Plain Cree tongue.

The answer came promptly, in the English tongue from the leading pale-face.

"We mean you no harm, Netawaka, and only wish to ask you a few questions."

"Ask them from where you stand, White Wolf," came the clear reply, in the same language. "Your lungs are sound, and my hearing keen. Back! move another step forward and this arrow shall split your false heart!"

As the white man spoke, the young trailers started and looked at each other with dilating eyes, for the voice was that of one whom they had believed dead—whom they had left helpless, bound hand and foot to perish in a terrible snow-storm—the voice of Dirk Weeninx!

"It's either him or the devil—ef it ain't his ghost!" muttered Zeph, his superstition awakened, paling his cheek.

"That is a living man, and if really Dirk Weeninx, then we are on the right trail!" uttered Dainty Lance, his blue eyes glowing vividly. "If it comes to burning powder, spare his life. He may know where Sibyl is. If only we can take him prisoner!"

"The two on 'em's thar! Yender's Ham Top-long—I kin make out his wolf-face."

During this hurried interchange of words, Dirk Weeninx—for it was indeed the chief of the Mountain Vultures, alive and in the flesh—was apparently consulting with his comrades, who seemed unwilling to rush upon the almost certain death that threatened at least one of their number, in the steel-barbed arrow held by the Wolf Queen. And as Dirk Weeninx turned once more toward the beautiful Amazon, his followers dropped down behind the adjacent bowlders.

From their elevated covert the young trailers saw that there was more than cowardice in this movement, for, like human snakes, the four Indians began crawling nearer to the rock ledge, carefully hiding their movements from the Wolf Queen. Apparently she did not suspect their purpose, but answered the hail of the Mountain Vulture, again demanding his wishes.

"You need not be so suspicious, for I mean you no harm," said Weeninx, seating himself upon a bowlder. "All I want is a little information. People say that you have learned a little witchcraft from your mother, Kangewock. If so, maybe you can serve my turn."

The young trailers, from their peep behind the scenes, saw that the ruffian was talking against time, hoping thus to mask the movements of his dusky allies.

"She is no fool—see!" muttered Dainty Lance, as the Wolf Queen, as if unconsciously, moved so as to conceal her person from danger, as the red-skins stealthily drew nearer. "She knows what they are doing, and will open their eyes at the proper time—never doubt it!"

"It's about my wife," added Weeninx, hastily, as though afraid his coveted prize was about to elude him by flight. "She run away, or was stolen away and brought up here. Sibyl, her name is—"

During this speech, Hardy Zeph was growing more and more excited. He saw that the Indians were taking full advantage of their being hidden from view of the Wolf Queen, by her change of position, and relaxing their caution, they hastened forward to reach the base of the rock on which she stood.

With an interest far deeper than he had ever before felt in one of the opposite sex, the young trailer cocked and raised his rifle, forgetting all else in his generous resolve to save the Wolf Queen. And faithful to his friend, though against his own convictions of prudence, Dainty Lance made the same preparations. But the Wolf Queen just then gave evidence that she was fully competent to take care of herself.

With an active leap she stood upon the verge of the ledge, the long arrow drawn to its head and covering the heart of the foremost savage. They were taken completely by surprise, and before they could make a move forward, or leap to cover, the feathered shaft hissed through the air, its barbed head splitting the heart of the un-

lucky wretch upon whom the Wolf Queen had first set her gaze.

Uttering a horrible yell of death-agony, the warrior leaped high into the air, dead ere his body touched the rocks.

Swift as thought a second arrow was fitted to the string, and as the survivors sprung to cover it left the bow.

Striking its victim under the shoulder-blade, the arrow passed clear through the red-skin's body, falling upon the rocks before him. Uttering the death-yell, the savage fell forward, biting and splintering the blood-stained shaft with his strong teeth in his last throes.

"Take the right-hand critter!" grated Zeph, his eyes aglow as he raised his rifle.

The two red-skins had taken to cover which perfectly screened them from the rock ledge on which the Wolf Queen stood, but unwitting of danger from behind, their bronzed backs were fully exposed to the aim of the young trailers.

Hardy Zeph fired first, but the last Indian could hardly have heard the report that rung out the death-knell of his comrade, ere his spirit was cast loose from its casket of clay to bear the shades of his fellow-braves company along the trail to the happy hunting-grounds.

The white men seemed petrified by the unexpected attack of the Wolf Queen, and stood in open-mouthed amazement until the beautiful Amazon turned her arrows toward them.

Only a swift leap saved Dirk Weeninx from death, the arrow passing on and sinking feather-deep in the chest of one of his comrades. At this moment the two death-shots came from the rocks, and breaking cover, the young trailers dashed at a breakneck pace down the hill, bent on capturing their ancient enemy, if possible.

Four men dead, and a fifth mortally wounded, would have cowed a bolder heart than that owned by Dirk Weeninx, and with a yell of mingled fear and rage, both he and Ham Top-long turned in headlong flight.

Even they would not have run far, for the Wolf Queen was ready with another arrow, had not the wounded pale-face, with dying strength, raised his rifle and fired at her.

The bow and arrow fell from her hand, and spinning half-way around, she pressed one hand to her head, then sunk down upon the rock.

The young trailers witnessed her fall, and fierce shouts of vengeance burst from their lips, as they dashed on in pursuit of the fleeing outlaws. Had their rifles been loaded then, the life career of the Mountain Vultures would have come to a speedy end. As it was, at every leap their revolvers spoke, but the range was too long for successful pistol practice.

Never once looking back the outlaws fled on feet doubly winged by fear, doubtless believing an army in pursuit. But swifter still sped the avengers, now racing in silence, their pistols still. Every energy was called into play. They were resolved to capture at least Dirk Weeninx, for his mention of Sibyl, the Snow Sprite, while parleying with the Wolf Queen, told them that he must know something of her whereabouts.

But their hopes were doomed to disappointment. The outlaws were still more than a hun-

dred yards in advance, when the rocky valley was cleared, and a number of horses reached. Leaping into the saddle they dashed away, taking with them the animals belonging to their dead comrades.

Choking with rage, the young trailers halted.

"The devils have escaped us now, but I'll take the trail and hunt them down, though it takes me a lifetime!" uttered Dainty Lance, a deadly calm in his tones.

"Not ontel I look to *her*, fu'st—an' the hound as shot her down!" grated Hardy Zeph, his eyes glowing. "They's a woman layin' back yender, dead or dyin'. Ef dead, I mean to bury her—ef livin' she needs our help all the more."

Until this day, Hardy Zeph had ever been content to follow wherever Dainty Lance chose to lead, but now their positions appeared just reversed. It was Zeph who asserted and Dainty Lance who assented.

Hardy Zeph hastened along the back trail, pausing at the rock where the white man had fired the shot that laid the Wolf Queen low even in the moment of victory. A short, bitter snarl hissed through his clinched teeth as he saw that the fellow was dead, the avenging rifle still in his hands.

Seizing this, Zeph shattered it by one desperate blow across the boulder, then hastened on to the rock ledge.

The Wolf Queen was lying as she had fallen, upon her left side, her face masked with blood that was powerless to conceal her extraordinary beauty.

For a few moments the young trailers stood in awe-struck silence, as though spellbound. But then Hardy Zeph tenderly lifted her head, and with his finger probed the wound. A cry of joy parted his lips, for he found that the bullet had merely grazed her temple, breaking the skin and stunning her for the time being.

"Fetch some water—quick! Take my hat—hurry back!" he muttered, trembling like a leaf with strong agitation.

Without a word Dainty Lance hastened away to the little brook in the valley, and returning, they bathed the wound, and used every effort to restore the strange girl to consciousness.

So wholly absorbed were they in this generous duty that they were ignorant of the approach of danger, until they were violently assailed and flung forward upon their faces!

CHAPTER II.

DRIVEN TO BAY.

"THE ears of the White Medicine are open. Let my son speak straight as his arrows speed to the mark. His words shall not fall to the ground unheeded."

These words were spoken nearly as possible at the same moment that Hardy Zeph first discovered the Wolf Queen at play with her grizzly pets, and only a few miles distant from the valley in which the forest Amazon fought so gallantly for life.

They fell from the lips of a tall man, remarkable on more accounts than one.

Of more than ordinary height, with limbs and torso denoting enormous strength united with activity. With snow-white beard and hair that united in covering his breast and shoulders as

with a vail, nearly reaching his waist. With aquiline nose, and large eyes filled with a strangely impressive fire—a glittering, shifting, yet magnetic light such as is rarely found in the windows of an evenly-balanced brain. A pale-face, though arrayed in the fantastic garb of an Indian chief, and one whom the reader will recognize as the Mad Hermit, the father of Sibyl, the Snow Sprite.

His companion was scarcely less worthy of note; a very model of masculine beauty, an athlete from crown to sole, trim built as the woodland stag, yet with the strength and steel-tempered muscles of the royal tiger; one in the first flush of manhood, yet wearing the eagle plumes that told of more than one bloody war-path, showing him a chief as much by right of valor as by royal descent.

A more warlike race than that of the Plain Crees never confronted the pale-face, and of them all, none was braver or more fearless than the Shooting Star, son of grim old Kekionga and a pale-face mother.

He who never flinched from the most imminent peril, was now trembling perceptibly, and though somewhat reassured by the kindly intoned words of the Mad Hermit, it was not until the second attempt that he spoke.

"The Great Medicine is very wise. He must know the words that his son would speak. He is not blind. He has seen the love-light that filled the young chief's eyes whenever they rested upon the face of the White Fawn—"

"And his heart leaped with proud joy as he read the glad truth!" interrupted the hermit, grasping the hand of the young chief and pressing it with a fervor that was unfeigned, "for he knew that a terrible weight of anxiety was in a fair way to be lifted from his mind forever."

Shooting Star found no difficulty now in speaking. The joyous thanks flowed freely from his tongue until checked by a motion of the Mad Hermit's hand.

"I know all that you would say, and more. My feelings were the same when *her* mother first crossed the trail of my life. Pray the Great Spirit that the black night may not overwhelm you as it came upon me."

The Mad Hermit turned abruptly aside as these words fell from his lips, a terrible expression convulsing his features. The young chief gazed upon him in silence, deeply awed. Like the majority of his people, he regarded the pale-face as something more than mortal. Only the passionate love which had been kindled in his untrained heart by the wonderful beauty of Sibyl enabled the superstitious warrior to smother his awe and reverence sufficiently to reveal his wishes to the Great Medicine.

He had done so, had been met more than half-way, and if not told so in as many words, had been given to understand that his suit found favor in the father's eyes. He knew that Sibyl was near, and longed to hasten to her side, there to declare his great love and receive the sweet assurance that it was not unpleasant in her ears, but he did not know how to take his leave.

The question was speedily solved for him. From some little distance there came a thrill-

ring sound—the shrill, piercing scream of a woman!

"It is Sibyl's voice—crying for help!" gasped the Mad Hermit, then rushing headlong in the direction from which these alarming sounds proceeded.

But rapid as were his motions, the young chief passed him like the meteor which had given him his name.

With sad and gloomy thoughts Sibyl had left the Indian village that morning, roaming listlessly through the wood that bordered the rocky tract, followed at a respectful distance by the giant negro, Hercules.

Constant dwelling upon the horrible mockery of the betrothal feast [see POCKET LIBRARY No. 139] had almost driven her frantic. Raised to bliss almost ineffable by the blessing bestowed upon their love by her parent, only to have the cup of joy dashed from their lips by the diabolical cunning of the madman, and that in a manner too horrible to contemplate, she knew not whether her lover was living or dead, but she feared the worst, for when she recovered from the effects of the drug she had been forced to swallow, her father told her that those who had plotted against him so cunningly would never again draw the breath of life.

Hercules watched her night and day as they hurriedly fled to the far North. Great as was his devotion to her, his fidelity to the hermit was still more powerful.

On through the bitter cold until the land of the Plain Crees was reached, and there they found warm welcome in the village of grim old Kekionga.

Here a new peril threatened the maiden. The Shooting Star saw her, and forgot the love vows he had already uttered in the willing ears of one who, like himself, united the blood of pale-face and red-skin.

From the first the Mad Hermit favored the young chief, losing no opportunity of sounding his praises in the ears of his child, until, with a heavy heart, Sibyl saw that he was determined she should wed the half-breed.

Little wonder, then, that her thoughts were gloomy and bitter ones as she wandered aimlessly along on that cold spring morning. But she was suddenly recalled to a sense of present danger by a deep, cavernous growl, and raising her eyes, they beheld an object upon which few could have gazed unmoved.

Gaunt, half-famished from its long hibernation, a monstrous grizzly bear confronted her, mischief written upon every feature and glowing in its little red eyes.

The maiden was given no time for thought. The huge beast was almost within striking distance before she knew aught of his presence. Mechanically and almost as by instinct, Sibyl fitted an arrow to her bow and sent the feathered shaft deep into the breast of the monster.

A furious snarling roar told how sharply the bear was stung, and with open jaws it plunged at the plucky girl, who only escaped instant destruction by a swift leap aside.

Sibyl turned quickly while preparing for a second shot, but her foot caught upon a small

root, and she fell heavily upon her side. Not until then did she give vent to the cry for help that cut short the interview between the Mad Hermit and the Shooting Star. Not until the furious beast, blood trickling from the wound where the barbed shaft rankled, was almost upon her—and swift as they sped to the rescue, they would have been too late to even witness her death, had not aid been still nearer at hand.

Old Hercules was a trusty guardian, and though he kept himself unobtrusively out of the way while performing the duty set him by his master, there was no time, night or day, that he was not within sight or hearing of his beloved mistress.

He heard the angry growl of the grizzly, and saw its first mad plunge at Sibyl. He was armed only with his club, but he did not hesitate for an instant or give a single thought to the peril he himself would be incurring.

With a deep, hollow roar of anger, he bounded forward and confronted the huge beast, just as Sibyl fell, and the grizzly checked its baffled rush to turn upon and rend the dainty morsel it had so unexpectedly stumbled upon.

"Yar's yer meat, ye dirty, hairy, overgrown nigger on fo' legs!" he growled, fiercely, as his great club whistled through the air. "An' now dis yer' chile reckon ye done get it, too!"

The grizzly bear was so intent upon making sure of its dainty prey, that it had not noticed the negro until too late to elude the terrible blow aimed at it. The huge club alighted fairly upon its long skull with a crash that resounded through the leafless forest, and with a fierce, snarling cry, the creature rolled over and over.

Knowing well his own powers, and having thrown all his energy into the stroke, Hercules believed his blow a fatal one, and dropping his club, sprung to where Sibyl still lay, confused and half-stunned by her heavy fall.

Though dictated by his love—almost adoration—for her, this action bade fair to prove a fatal one. Only the quick eye and hurried speech of the Snow Sprite saved them.

"Look! the bear—Hercules!"

Terrible as that blow had been in its crushing force, tearing the scalp almost entirely from the beast's skull, it had not proved fatal, nor even sufficient to disable the bear. With a catlike agility, wonderful in such a mass of seeming clumsiness, the grizzly regained its feet, and without a note of warning, plunged after the giant negro, bent on revenge.

Hercules glanced over his shoulder at the warning cry, and read the full extent of his peril at once. Swiftly he arose, a heavy stone in each hand. One—two—with all the power of his mighty arm he flung the stones, and once more the great beast measured its length upon the ground.

The giant black leaped to where his club lay and grasped it with a fierce laugh. His fighting blood was fairly up.

He grasped the weapon and hurled it aloft—none too soon. The raging beast was upon him, its open jaws dripping mingled froth and blood, its eyes bloodshot and blazing with fury.

The struggle which followed defies analyzation. A dozen clubs and double that number of hairy,

nail-armed paws seemed blended together in an ever-changing tangle.

Then a sharp cry parted the white, fear-blanchéd lips of the maiden as she saw the club of Hercules whirling through the air, several rods away from the combatants. The giant negro had been disarmed by a parrying blow of the bear's paw.

Sibyl caught up her bow, but, before she could use the weapon, the man and the beast closed in a death-grapple, both standing erect, but so rapidly shifting their positions that she dare not let the arrow loose lest she strike the wrong life.

Thoroughly maddened by the protracted struggle, during which he had received more than one ugly scratch from the span-long claws that armed the paws of his hairy antagonist, Hercules made no attempt to seek safety in retreating when he found his trusty club torn from his grasp, but boldly met the onward rush of the bear with his naked hands, confident in his enormous strength. Nor would this confidence have been misplaced, had Bruin also been disarmed; but those terrible claws played vigorously in the negro's flesh, while the long, white fangs gnashed before his eyes.

Maddened by pain and rage, the negro exerted his strength to the utmost, and overthrew the huge beast, falling upon it. But those mighty paws still held him fast, and those long claws slit his black skin into ribbons, while the gleaming teeth clashed in his face.

Only for a moment. Then Hercules, like his namesake of old, grasped the parted jaws, and, with one superhuman effort, twisted them in twain!

It was at this supreme moment that the half-breed chief reached the spot. A single glance showed him the danger of risking a shot, and by no means unwilling to display his cool skill before the maiden whose love he was so desirous of winning, he darted forward, knife in hand.

One swift, well-judged blow, and the deed was done. With its heart fairly cloven in twain, the grizzly relaxed its grasp and gave up the ghost.

Sibyl made one impulsive step forward as though to thank the slayer, but then paused, the vivid flush fading from her cheeks as she recognized the young chief. A look almost of aversion came into her eyes, for she remembered the words breathed into her ears that morning by her father:

"Be kind to the Shooting Star—treat him as a maiden should treat her future husband."

At the time she had hardly heeded the words, much less understood them; but now she was wiser as she met the burning glance of the young half-breed. His eyes were filled with the light of a fiery, passionate lover.

The unsophisticated child of the wilderness did not read aright her sudden change of countenance, but the Mad Hermit did, as he came hastily up. One glance showed him that Sibyl was unharmed, and every trace of emotion vanished as by magic.

"My son has done well," he said, bowing slightly to Shooting Star, then touching his arm and leading him to where the Snow Sprite stood,

white and colorless. "Sibyl, the chief has just preserved your life at the risk of meeting death himself. Have you no word of thanks for his gallantry?"

"There is no need," hastily interposed the half-breed, his face flushing still deeper than nature had tinted it, his voice softly modulated. "What I did was nothing—for a smile from the lips of the White Fawn, I would face a score such clumsy beasts."

Instead of speaking, Sibyl shrunk still further away, with a hunted look in her eyes that the Mad Hermit had no difficulty in rightly interpreting. His brows contracted. His voice was stern and even menacing as he spoke again.

"My child, recover your senses. You have not forgotten what I told you this morning. The chief has spoken to me, and I have gladly given my consent. He is to be your future husband. Greet him as such."

As he spoke, the hermit, whose hand still rested upon the arm of the young half-breed, gave him a gentle impulse. Obeying this, Shooting Star started toward the maiden and made as though he would clasp her in his arms, to taste the first sweets of their betrothal.

A deep flush of anger suffused Sibyl's cheeks as she evaded his embrace, plucking a sharp, slender knife from her girdle and threatening her astonished suitor.

"Back! touch me with but a finger, chief, and the point of the knife shall reach your heart!"

The young chief stared in mute amazement. To do him simple justice, he had until this moment believed Sibyl loved him, or at least, that she was not at all averse to his suit. He had courted the pale-face maiden, as in duty bound, through her father, and that consent once gained, he supposed the remainder would be plain sailing. But now his eyes were opened. The look of despairing horror upon the face of the White Fawn could not be mistaken.

For reasons of his own, which will be made clear in the sequel, the Mad Hermit was both anxious and determined that this union should take place. With an angry frown he started forward, but Shooting Star caught his uplifted arm, and stopped him.

"Not even you shall raise a hand in anger against her in my presence," uttered the young chief, in a stern tone, which softened strangely as he turned toward Sibyl. "And you, White Fawn, why should you draw a weapon upon my life? If I have wronged or injured you, it must have been in my sleep, when the evil spirits were at work. See! here is my breast. Beneath it beats my heart—the heart of a chief! Strike—if you can detect one false drop of blood—strike, and even as I die, my lips will utter your name as that of the only maiden whom I can love!"

For one moment the life of the young man hung upon a thread. Sibyl knew that her father never altered his mind when once fairly set. He had avowed his purpose of wedding her to this handsome barbarian, and she knew that no entreaties of hers could change his purpose.

One swift, desperate stroke—but then her muscles relaxed and her arm slowly sunk to her

side. A convulsive shudder agitated her frame, and she flung the gleaming steel far from her. Rapidly the words fell from her lips:

"No—you are honest—noble-hearted—I cannot strike. But in pity spare me. I do not love—I cannot wed you!"

With an angry curse, the Mad Hermit sought to check her, but waf himself grasped by the chief and forcibly restrained.

With a low, sobbing cry, Sibyl turned and fled rapidly from the spot, while Hercules, bleeding freely from his hurts, hastened to the aid of his master.

CHAPTER III.

THE INDIAN WITCH.

VIOLENTLY assaulted from behind without a sound of warning, both Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph were overthrown before they could even think of offering resistance.

The first thought that struck them was that Dirk Weeninx and his Mountain Vultures had recovered from their surprise and had retraced their steps for revenge. But this was of brief duration. Even as it occurred to them, they felt sharp claws that never adorned the hands of human beings, and heard the menacing clatter of strong teeth that threatened to bury themselves in their throats. And then the strange truth flashed upon them as by instinct.

"They're *her* wolves—don't fight unless ye *hev* to!" cried Hardy Zeph in a tone of eager warning.

If Dainty Lance made any reply, it was drowned by the wild tumult which followed the sound of the young trapper's voice.

Each one of the wolves—and there was fully two dozen in number, from the diminutive coyote to his giant cousin of the sable robe—broke forth into howls and snarls, some menacing, others doleful and lugubrious in cadence, but all combined to form a blood-curdling chorus that was fairly deafening.

Both lads believed that the critical moment had arrived, and each nerved himself for the horrible death-grapple which must follow; but just then came a reprieve, and from a most unexpected quarter.

What the plentiful use of cold water had begun was completed by that diabolical chorus. The forest Amazon roused up at the sounds of her four-footed pets, and taking in the situation at a glance, hastily arose, at the same time uttering a shrill, peculiar cry.

The change was almost magical. Like so many skillfully-constructed automatons, each wolf fell back, forming a circle around the three forms, sitting upon their haunches, their eyes fixed upon the face of their mistress as though eager to anticipate her further wishes.

"Better than a circus!" muttered Dainty Lance, sitting up.

Not a word came from Hardy Zeph. His eyes were riveted upon the face of the Wolf Queen with an intentness and forgetfulness of all else that plainly told their own story.

The Wolf Queen cast but a single glance at them, to assure herself that they had received no serious injury from her faithful guard, then

raised one hand with a commanding gesture as she cried:

"Tarkio!"

The huge black wolf leaped forward and crouched at her feet.

"Give me your hand," she said to Dainty Lance, speaking in plain English, without the least accent. "So—touch his head—look him firmly in the eye. From this time on he will acknowledge you as his master. He will fight in your defense as he would in mine. Only my voice can cause him to forget the lesson he now learns."

One by one the wolves were called up by name, and went through a similar introduction to the young trappers. Dainty Lance was inclined to smile at the peculiar ceremony, but not so Hardy Zeph. An utter change had come over him since first setting eyes upon the Wolf Queen. He placed implicit confidence in every word she uttered, and followed her directions without the slightest hesitation.

This strange introduction over, the strange girl—for such she was in years, despite her commanding stature and superbly developed form—spoke rapidly and feelingly.

"You risked your lives for mine—and I a stranger to you both. I am grateful. Only for you, death or an even worse fate must have overtaken me. White Wolf and Walking Buzzard would have had no mercy—"

"We're white men an' couldn't 'a' done no less," quickly interposed Zeph, an ardent light in his keen gray eyes. "You was a woman an' in trouble; that says the hull thing."

"My brother is right," added Dainty Lance, obeying a sudden impulse. "No thanks is needed for doing our simple duty; but there a way in which you can repay us, if you only will—"

"Ask—Netawaka will do it if she can. He life is yours, Silver-tongue," was the reply.

In as few words as possible Dainty Lance told why they were there in the land of the hostile Plain Crees.

Netawaka listened intently but slowly shook her head when the young man concluded.

"It may be that she whom you seek is here, but if so, I have neither seen nor heard aught of her. She is your sister?"

"No—not a sister, but a very dear friend."

The half-breed girl gazed at him intently for a moment, then turned abruptly away, her head bowed as if in deep thought. A brief space thus, then she faced around, her countenance composed, her voice cold and steady:

"If the maiden you seek is here, there is one near who can tell you where she is hidden. All the secrets of both air and earth are clear to her eyes as the letters in a printed book to the brain of a pale-face."

"Whom do you mean? Lead me to her, and if she can tell me what I seek to know, name your own reward—"

"Make no rash promises, my brother," interrupted the Wolf Queen, with a strange, cold smile. "You may have cause to curse instead of thank me. All who visit old Kangewock do not come away again."

A sudden revulsion came over Dainty Lance. Something told him that there was terrible dan-

ger ahead, that his only hope lay in speedy retreat; why, he could not have told himself, but such was the fact.

Not so with Hardy Zeph.

"They can't be nothin' very p'izen 'bout the old lady, sense *you* know her," he said, with simple earnestness. "Ef you'll only show us the way, lady, we'll be powerful thankful."

The Wolf Queen flashed a swift glance toward Dainty Lance, then started rapidly away, surrounded by her four-footed guard.

Dainty Lance, still under that strange influence, caught Hardy Zeph by the arm as he was following, and checked him.

"It may be a trap—I believe on my soul that she is deceiving us!" he muttered, uneasily.

"Ef any but you hinted sech a thing, I'd answer with my fist," sharply retorted Zeph. "What's come over ye, all of a sudden? You used to act fu'st an' count up the resk a'ter-ward; but now you're hangin' back when news of the lady you love is waitin' afore ye—"

"It does look as though you and I had suddenly exchanged natures," said Dainty Lance, with a faint smile. "It was *you* who dreaded the *gal-spoosks*—"

"Which shows I was a pesky fool an' didn't know it. I'm goin' to foller her, whether you go or not. An' more'n that, ef I kin coax her to hev anythin' to do with sech a mutton-head as I be, I'll make her my wife—so thar!"

While this hurried conversation was in progress, the Wolf Queen, becoming aware of the fact that she was not followed, paused and faced around with ill concealed impatience. Zeph saw this, and catching up his rifle, strode rapidly after her.

Strong as his premonitions of impending evil were, Dainty Lance could not bring himself to desert his heart-brother, and promptly followed in his footsteps.

Clearly Netawaka was in no humor for conversation. She led the way through the rocky defiles, over the broken ground, at a rapid pace.

For considerably more than an hour the Wolf Queen led them through the rocky fastness, then halted abruptly as she uttered the first sound that passed her lips since leaving the scene of the bloody struggle with the Mountain Vultures; a long-drawn, wailing cry that echoed mournfully through the wilds—the imitation of the panther's signal.

If there was any answering signal, neither of the young men caught it, but Netawaka appeared satisfied, and bidding them follow, she ran lightly up a steep, winding trail.

"Look to your pistols, Zeph," muttered Dainty Lance, doubtfully. "It may be a trap she's leading us into."

The young trapper made no reply, but his actions showed how little he regarded the caution. Without touching a weapon he pressed on after Netawaka, and Dainty Lance saw them both disappear behind a mass of thickly woven evergreens.

"Both or neither!" he muttered, raising the hammer of his revolver as he hastened forward, pressing through the leafy screen and finding himself face to face with his comrade and their strange guide.

A faint smile curled the lip of the Indian girl

as she noted the ready weapon, and there was a trace of sarcasm in her voice as she spoke.

"Kangewock will be proud to find herself still an object of fear to the mighty pale-face in her blind old age. Creep softly along and you may take her captive while she sleeps."

Dainty Lance flushed hotly, but made no reply. Neither did he restore his weapon to its resting-place.

With a toss of her proud head that was very feminine, the Wolf Queen turned and led the way through a narrow, winding passage, feebly lighted by cracks and crevices in the rocky roof that opened upon the outer world. Close at her heels the young trappers followed, pausing only when she paused to pick up a smoldering brand from a fire burning in a little niche in the wall. This she swung around her head until the torch burst into flame, then hastened onward once more.

The air within the hill retreat was damp and cold, but the young adventurers were more strongly impressed by a peculiar, rank smell that was more easily recognized than described.

"Your menagerie can't be very far ahead," muttered Dainty Lance, to his comrade. "It smells like a regular den of wild beasts!"

"I'll go as fur as *she* leads, ef it takes me into the middle of a rijiment o' b'ars an' wolves an' painters," quietly responded Zeph.

A few rods further carried them into a low-roofed rocky chamber, dimly lighted by a smoky fire, over which a weird-looking creature was crouching.

"Ef that ain't the devil, it must be his gran'mam!" muttered Zeph, involuntarily clutching a weapon and falling back a pace as the strange being turned her face toward them.

Even Dainty Lance felt a thrill of mingled superstition and disgust, for a more hideous burlesque on humanity had never met his gaze, as the Indian witch rose erect.

Of extraordinary hight, the hag was little more than a lively skeleton, so much so that the faint crackling of the dried wolf-skins which served her as dress, seemed the rattling of bones in her smoke-tanned, time-wrinkled skin.

A few snaky locks of coarse, snow-white hair hung around her face and shoulders. A necklace of human teeth, white and polished, gleamed in the firelight upon her skinny neck. Her face, and arms were covered by emblems of bird, beast and reptiles, drawn in different colored paints, while her deep-sunken eyes, strangely bright for one blind as the Wolf Queen had hinted, gleamed and glittered like those of a venomous serpent.

Netawaka glided forward and spoke rapidly in the tongue of the Plain Crees, so low that neither of the young men could catch the meaning of a word.

A moment of silence followed the speech of Netawaka, then the Indian witch strode forward and placed one hand upon the shoulder of Dainty Lance, her wrinkled hideous face thrust almost against his own, her gleaming eyes seeming to burn into his very brain.

"A pale-face, young and beautiful," she uttered, in a voice that sounded wonderfully musical to emanate from such a repulsive source,

As she spoke, her claw-like fingers were passed swiftly over the young man's face as though her eyesight lay in their tips. Despite his courage, Dainty Lance shrunk away with an involuntary shudder of disgust and aversion. There was nothing human in that cold, clammy touch. It seemed like the pawing of some accursed dead.

A low, mocking laugh came from the toothless mouth, and the Indian witch spoke again, in clear and fluent English.

"Your grandfather would not have trembled and shrunk away from my touch. Time was when men have fought and died for a touch of my hand—for a smile from my lips—and died counting themselves blessed if I spoke but a word of praise over their bloody graves. For I was young and beautiful then—so beautiful that great braves, both white and red, came from the salt waters where the sun rises and sets, just to gaze upon me from the hill-tops and to worship my footsteps as I passed through the forest. But now—that was long ago—I am old and blind and ugly. Men run and hide when they see me coming. They call me an old witch, but not to my face—no, no! The silly fools whisper it in their sleeves, thinking I will never know. But I have many cunning imps who serve me faithfully, and the teeth through which those bitter taunts pass—see! I have them here!" and with a low laugh the weird creature fingered her horrible necklace.

"Ha! one of my trusty imps whispers in your ear that it shall soon add *your* strong, young teeth to my collection! Bah! I am growing childish, and know not what I say," she added, hurriedly, as if conscious of having spoken too plainly. "You came to see me. What do you want of old Kangewock?"

"Tell her your story as you told it to me," hastily whispered Netawaka.

Dainty Lance obeyed the Wolf Queen, detailing such of his story as seemed necessary.

As he spoke a complete change came over the Indian witch. All fire and energy died away. Her tall form grew bowed, and a dull film crept over her eyes. She looked more than ever like a skeleton raised from the grave.

Still she lent an ear to his words, and made reply when he had ended.

"It may be that I can tell you what you seek to learn. I have heard something like it—but all is cloudy now. There is a mist over my brain. I must sleep and dream. Go—leave me alone. To-morrow I will answer you. Go!"

She turned away, and once more cowered over the fire.

"Say no more," whispered the Wolf Queen, gently grasping the arm of Dainty Lance. "She will have her own way. Come—I will show you where you can pass the night comfortably. In the morning Kangewock will tell you all."

"Show us the way outside, and we will find shelter for ourselves," replied Dainty Lance, somewhat coldly.

"Have your way then, since you doubt me."

There was a sadness in her tones, that touched even Dainty Lance, while Hardy Zeph was mad

enough almost to fight his heart's brother for having given cause for it.

"You kin go, but durned ef I do! I mean to do as the lady 'vises, even ef she hain't got no better way to lodge me then to hang me up on a nail, head down'ards—so thar!"

So earnest was the young trapper, that the shadow on the girl's face was chased away by a smile, and almost for the first time she looked him squarely in the face. What she saw there apparently did not displease her, for she extended her hand, which the lad, with native grace, pressed to his lips.

Banishing the vague presentiment as being wholly without foundation, Dainty Lance made a frank apology, and after a few words, the Wolf Queen procured another torch and led them through a narrow passage to a second and smaller chamber.

In one corner was a pile of fine dry grass and leaves, covered with furs and skins tanned with the hair on. From the rock walls hung various garments which could only belong to the forest Amazon.

"Yes," she said, noticing their glances, "this is my room, but I have another not far away, so you are not robbing me. Be patient for a few minutes, and I will bring you some supper."

As she spoke, she disappeared, followed by her wolves, leaving the young men to themselves.

The air of the rock chamber was cold, and Dainty Lance, noting a fireplace well filled with wood, in one corner, soon had a cheerful blaze started by means of the torch left them by their new and strangely-acquired ally.

Netawaka was as good as her word, speedily returning with bread and hot meat, and seated together, they made a good and cheerful supper.

While eating, they interchanged confidences, the Wolf Queen telling the strange story of her life. A brief synopsis is all that need be given in this place.

She was the granddaughter of old Kangewock, who had not greatly exaggerated the truth when she claimed for herself beauty and many charms when young. A pure-blooded Indian, she had at length married, according to the rites of her tribe, a white fur-trader from Scotland. Among their many children, was the mother of Netawaka, who received a fair education from her father and a missionary who passed some years among the Plain Crees. She in turn married a pale-face who though only a trapper, came from a good family and was an educated man. From these parents, Netawaka received an education much more thorough than might have been expected, considering her early age when they were killed by a party of warriors from a neighboring tribe. At the same time Kangewock received a terrible blow upon the head which partially deranged her senses, and she fled to the hills with her grandchild. She had always been noted for her power of subduing wild beasts, and since her injury, this taste became a ruling passion. As time passed on, she imbued the girl with the same fancy, until now they were both looked upon with superstitious dread by the members of their tribe, and thus led a peculiarly isolated life. As they were shunned, so too they were unmolested, until a few weeks prior to that date, when the Moun-

tain Vultures, Dirk Weeninx and Ham Toplong, made their reappearance and formed an alliance with a number of outlawed and degraded Indians of the tribe. Twice before had Weeninx insulted the forest Amazon, but never until that day had he offered her positive violence.

Supper ended, Netawaka once more called up her four-footed guards, and repeated the curious introduction, teaching each wolf to acknowledge the young trappers as their masters.

"They will fight for you now until each one is torn to pieces. No voice but mine can induce them to forget this lesson and touch you with either tooth or claw."

Promising to call them at the first dawn of day, to hear what old Kangewock could tell them of the Snow Sprite, Netawaka left them to themselves, followed by her grisly body-guard.

"Don't do it, Lance, unless you want us to git to pullin' ha'r," said Zeph, gravely, as his comrade began joking him about his evident infatuation for the queen of the wolves. "They's never a crooked word passed between us as long as we've bin on the trail together, an' I'd mighty hate fer to it to begin now; but come it will ef you rub me too heavy on this p'int. So fur in life I've been a durned bull-headed fool. I judged everythin' from what I saw while livin' with the old folks. They got drunk regular every day, and fit regular every night. I tuck it that all married folks did the same way, an' so I didn't want any of it in mine. But my eyes was opened the minnit they set themselves onto *her*. I says then, and I says now, ef she'll hev me, I'll marry her jest as soon as the Lord 'll let me—an' ef she *won't*, then you nur nobody else won't never see Zeph Hardy pullin' double harness with airy other female gal—so thar!"

Dainty Lance saw that the young trapper was in sober earnest, and refrained from saying anything more on the subject.

Hardy Zeph, feeling absolute confidence in the good faith of his inamorata, and worn out by fatigue added to much loss of sleep, rolled himself up in a robe and was almost immediately lost in the land of dreams.

Not so Dainty Lance. He had more to keep him awake, not to mention that strong foreboding of impending evil, and for an hour or two longer he sat before the fire, fully resolved not to close an eye that night in slumber. But human nature is weak, especially when it has been overtired as had his, and ere long his head drooped, his body sunk over, and his senses were lost in a grateful oblivion.

Scarcely had his regular breathing denoted perfect slumber, than a hideous object crept stealthily into the circle of light cast around by the glowing embers—the form of the old Indian witch, Kangewock!

The red firelight gleamed upon the bright blade of a long knife which she held between her toothless jaws, and as she crept serpentlike to the side of the sleeping youth, her skinny hand closed upon the horn handle, and the keen blade was poised above his strongly beating heart, ready to be driven home at the first signs of his awaking.

A few moments thus, then, as the youth unsuspectingly slumbered on, the weapon was lowered

and the hag produced a small horn bottle containing a colorless, pungent-scented liquid, which she poured over a rag, then pressed the saturated cloth over the nostrils and mouth of the young adventurer.

At the touch Dainty Lance awoke, but the hideous hag had chosen her baleful agent well. Before he could utter a sound or move a limb, the work was done. Had his body been suddenly petrified he could not have been more utterly helpless. His brain was as clear and active as ever, but he could not cry aloud or move a muscle. Fiercely he strove, but in vain. He saw that hideous face bent close to his. He saw those serpent-like eyes glaring mockingly into his own, and saw the hag dangle the horrible necklace of teeth before his face, thus silently recalling her threat of a few hours before. Oh! if Hardy Zeph would only awaken!

But he did not.

Deftly the Indian witch unbuckled the belt containing Dainty Lance's weapons, and laid it aside. Then, with a strength truly wonderful in one so old and of such slender build, she raised the helpless youth in her arms and noiselessly left the lighted chamber, gliding steadily along through the dark passage as readily as though her reputed sightless eyes possessed the visionary powers of a cat.

It was a truly horrible ordeal for Dainty Lance.

On through the inky blackness passed the witch with her helpless burden, finally pausing near where a large torch was burning in a niche. Here she laid Dainty Lance down, pushing his head and shoulders over a ledge of rock, beyond and beneath which all was intense darkness.

Dainty Lance turned sick and faint at heart, for he guessed the truth. A horrible, fetid smell came up from the unknown depths, such as only emanates from a den where many wild beasts are berded together.

As though reading his thoughts, the witch laughed horribly.

"My pets are down there, hungry, and must be fed—panthers, bears and wolves! When they are done with you, then I will collect your teeth, clean and polish them up, and add them to my beautiful necklace!"

Mingled with the sound of her voice, there came low growls and snarls from below. Dainty Lance saw many glowing eyeballs—then with another frightful laugh, the Indian witch thrust him headlong into the wild beast den!

CHAPTER IV.

THE SNOW SPRITE IN DANGER.

"OUT of my way, or I'll ride over you!"

The speaker was Dirk Weeninx, and he addressed his comrade in iniquity, Ham Toplong, whose panting horse had cut in ahead of the other as they came in their mad flight to a narrow gorge where horsemen could only ride in single file.

Both were nearly beside themselves with terror. The sudden death of their five fellows, where they had counted upon little or no resistance, took all the brute courage out of them, and they still fled at breakneck speed, though no longer pursued.

As he spoke, Dirk Weeninx lifted his horse and caused it to plunge bodily upon that bestrode by Ham Toplong, thinking only of removing all obstructions to his own flight. The shock was a terrible one, and both animals went down under it, they and their riders forming a confused heap from which emanated fierce curses, cries and snorts of mingled rage and pain.

Dirk was the first to free himself and arise, casting a fearful glance along the back trail as a fierce imprecation hissed from between his teeth.

"Curses on your infernal clumsiness, why didn't you get out of the way?" he snarled, characteristically casting the blame where it least belonged. "If they overtake us, I'll save one bullet for your fool heart!"

Bruised and bleeding, Ham Toplong struggled clear of his fallen horse, but made no reply in words to the unmerited abuse of his comrade. To do so would but fan the brutal rage of the desperado, and provoke a sudden pistol-shot or knife-thrust. Even then he might not have escaped, had not the sharp clatter of horses' hoofs come to their ears from the mouth of the narrow defile near the middle of which their insane flight had come to an end.

"Take cover and fight for your life!" grated Weeninx, leaping to where a fallen fragment of rock would afford him a tolerable breastwork.

His example was instantly followed.

"Make sure of the boys!" was all that Dirk Weeninx had time to mutter in addition, before the cause of their alarm came sweeping into open view—a riderless horse, one of those which they had stampeded to keep from falling into the hands of their pursuers.

In their mad flight they had soon lost control of the unmounted animals, and this was one of those they had passed by.

At first glance they recognized the creature, and as there came no other sounds from beyond to alarm them, the Mountain Vultures quickly recovered a portion of their wonted coolness.

Acting in concert they quickly managed to secure the horse, and Dirk Weeninx speedily mounted it.

"Take the horse I rode," he said to Toplong. "You've crippled your own with your crazy riding. Lively! let's get out of this trap!"

With some difficulty the disabled horse was overpassed and left where he lay, to die a lingering death of starvation unless its tortures were cut short by beasts of prey. Dirk Weeninx led the way, riding recklessly and casting frequent glances of apprehension over his shoulder, until many miles from the spot where a long-merited retribution had overtaken his comrades in evil.

To those of our readers who may have followed the fortunes of our boy heroes through the preceding volume of this series, a brief explanation is due at this point, in order to clear up this seeming resurrection of men supposed to be both dead and buried.

In that volume [POCKET LIBRARY, No. 139] Dirk Weeninx and Ham Toplong figured prominently as the head villains of a rascally gang of Mountain Vultures. Among other crimes, they surprised Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph while out hunting, disarmed and bound

them back to back, then left them with many taunts to die a lingering death in the terrible snow-storm, which was then just beginning. When nearly dead, the young trappers were rescued by Sibyl, the Snow Sprite and her giant body-guard, the negro, Hercules, taken to the ice-chamber, and there fully restored to life and health.

The Mountain Vultures believed that the Mad Hermit possessed a wonderful store of hidden wealth, and this belief was nourished by Dirk Weeninx, who felt a burning passion for Sibyl. In the struggle which followed, both of the outlaw leaders were captured, and being tried, were condemned to suffer the same doom they had pronounced upon the young trappers only a short time before.

The sentence was promptly put into execution. Bound and gagged, the two wretches were removed from the ice palace and planted waist-deep in the snow. Night was setting in. Snow-flakes filled the air. Every moment the storm was growing more and more severe. No human being could live through a long night of such exposure. And not only that night, but for days afterward the raging storm continued without pause or abating its fury. When the sun shone forth again, search was made for the criminals, but in vain. There were many deep hollows and abysses on every hand, now partially or wholly filled with snow that would only yield to the warm breath of the midsummer sun, and all supposed that at the bottom of one of these lay the bodies of the Mountain Vultures.

But such was not the case. Luckily for Weeninx and Toplong, one of their men who had been wounded—killed, as they believed at the time—in the attack upon the ice cave, revived sufficiently to creep away and reach the den in which they had made their headquarters. And this man, true to his evil brotherhood, having bound up his hurts, crawled forth to learn if any save himself had survived the bitter fight.

From his hiding-place near the ice-cave, he saw his mates brought forth to die, and patiently waiting until darkness set in, lest he should be discovered by the enemy, he dragged himself through the rapidly deepening snow, found the outlaws, now half-dead with cold and fear, cut their bonds and rubbed the life back into their benumbed limbs. Together they retreated to their den, and there remained for several days, recruiting strength and nursing their wounds. Then, as the storm gave signs of breaking away, they stole off in the night, their trail being obliterated by the falling snow.

In another secure covert the trio of rascals lay *perdu*, only venturing forth when the want of food rendered such exposure imperative, biding their time and nursing their wounds and schemes of revenge together.

At length, when ready for work, in reconnoitering the cave, they found a fresh trail leading to the north. It was that left by Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph, having broken the spell of living death put upon them by the treacherous hermit, and now setting forth upon their almost hopeless search for the fair girl whom the young trapper loved so ardently.

The Mountain Vultures lost some time in

cautious scouting around before they ventured to enter the ice cave, only to find it deserted. In vain they searched for the supposed golden hoard of the Mad Hermit. Either it had not existed, or else had been borne away with him.

Dirk Weeninx found the unfinished note written by Sibyl to Lance, and this gave him the desired clew. He knew where to look for his game now, and at once struck out for the land of the Plain Crees, reaching there some time ahead of the young trappers, thanks to his better knowledge of the past life of the Mad Hermit.

This was not his first visit to that region; in fact, it was here that he first heard of the Mad Hermit and his beautiful daughter.

For some time Dirk Weeninx and Ham Toplong rode at a rapid gait, then, assured that they were no longer pursued, they began looking around for a suitable spot in which to spend the night and consult over their future course.

But the adventures of that eventful day were not yet at an end. Faint and indistinct, coming from far away, a human cry reached their ears, and caused them to cease their preparations for encamping.

They interchanged doubting glances; but then Weeninx spoke:

"There's trouble of some kind over there. It may be nothing that concerns us, but I'm going to get at the bottom of it."

As he spoke, he mounted his horse and set out in the direction from whence sounded the alarm. Toplong followed.

Weeninx rode on until he judged he must be somewhere near the spot from whence the signal of trouble or danger had come, then dismounted and resigned his horse to Ham.

"Keep a lookout on my motions and guide yourself accordingly," he said tersely. "I depend on you in case of need. If you fail me, look out for the after-clap."

Crawling forward, keenly scrutinizing each foot of the ground before him as he advanced, the Mountain Vulture was at length rewarded by catching a glimpse of a human being as it cast itself to the ground beside a huge, moss-grown boulder. Only a glimpse, yet Dirk Weeninx gave a gasp of joy that was almost delirious in its intensity, for he recognized Sibyl the Snow Sprite! His long and arduous search had ended—his coveted prize was before him!

"It was her voice I heard, then," he muttered to himself as soon as he could master the mad triumph that caused his brain to whirl and grow dizzy. "Who was she calling to, and for what? If that infernal nigger isn't around!"

Cresting his head, the Mountain Vulture gazed intently around. So far as he could see, there was no one near who could or would dispute with him for the possession of the glorious prize of flesh and blood.

"So much the better for them!" he growled with a grim significance. "She's my game by the right of discovery, and those who dispute my claim now will taste powder and lead."

In his eagerness Weeninx did not pause to see whether Toplong understood his silent signal to close up with the horses, but prostrating himself flat upon his belly, crawled like some cunning serpent toward the unsuspecting maiden,

taking advantage of the excellent cover afforded by the thickly-scattered rocks and boulders. Thus until nearly within arm's-length of the maiden, when his eagerness came near defeating his purpose of capture.

In making his leap, a stone turned beneath his foot, and an involuntary cry parted his lips as he was thrown forward, falling partially upon Sibyl. One hand closed upon the skirt of her tunic, but terror, as Sibyl recognized her assailant, enabled her to break his hold and dart aside with a shrill scream that echoed far over the rocky waste.

With a fierce curse Weeninx scrambled to his feet and darted after her. Unfortunately for her hopes of escape, Sibyl unwittingly entered a narrow pass between two high rocks, which came abruptly to an end, forming a perfect *cul-de-sac*. She turned to retrace her steps, but Dirk Weeninx was already at the mouth of the "pocket," and her retreat was effectually cut off.

"No use, my dainty bird!" he cried in ferocious joy as he barred her passage with extended arms. "You are my game!"

"Back!" cried the maiden, her spirit rising equal to the emergency. "Back, I say! the first step forward will lead to your grave!"

Despite his brutish courage, Dirk Weeninx hesitated and even shrank away, for the dark muzzle of a cocked and leveled revolver stared him full in the face. It needed not a second glance to show him that Sibyl meant all her threat implied.

But only for a moment did the Mountain Vulture hesitate. A cry of warning came from Ham Toplong.

"Quick! skin out, mate! A hull gang is comin', with that cursed nigger at tha'r head, hot foot!"

It is barely possible that, could he have felt assured Sibyl would not have halted him by a bullet in the back as he tried to escape by flight, that the Mountain Vulture would have awaited a more favorable opportunity for catching his coveted prize. As it was, he abruptly crouched low down and leaped swiftly forward.

Sibyl was startled both by the cry of Toplong and this sudden assault. She drew trigger with a rapid change of aim, and though her bullet found its mark, the lead only tore through the whiskered cheek of the ruffian.

She was given time for no more. Uttering a hoarse cry of mingled pain and rage, Weeninx was upon her, knocking the weapon from her grasp and dealing her a cruel blow upon the head at one and the same time.

Momentarily stunned, Sibyl would have fallen heavily only for his quick grasp. Swinging her light form across his shoulder, the Mountain Vulture bounded away to where Ham Toplong was urging his horses through the thick-lying boulders.

From behind came a loud, angry roar that, once heard, could never be forgotten; the war-cry of Hercules the black giant. And higher, shriller, rung out the yell of Shooting Star.

"Drap the gal, or we're gone suckers!" gasped Toplong.

"Don't be a fool! they won't dare to shoot while we have her with us. Once out of those

cursed rocks and we can laugh at them. Steady with the horse, now!"

While speaking, Dirk Weeninx, still clinging to Sibyl, who was beginning to recover from the dastard blow he had dealt her, climbed into the saddle, then turned one glance backward as he gathered up the reins.

He saw the black giant rapidly approaching, not a hundred yards away, covering the broken ground with enormous bounds, brandishing his mighty club, and uttering his angry roar at every leap. Beyond came the young chief, straining every nerve, and close at his heels followed the Mad Hermit—three terrible foes.

"Keep together," hoarsely growled Weeninx, as he urged his horse to a reckless speed over the rock-strewn ground. "If you try to leave me, you'll catch a bit o' lead in the back."

The race was more even than might be supposed at first glance. The nature of the ground was such that no horse could pass over it at full speed without disaster following sooner or later. The pursuers, one and all, were in fine condition for a race, and favored by the thickly-strewn boulders, were slowly but steadily gaining upon the outlaws.

"Powder and lead is the only thing that can save our scalps now," grimly said Weeninx, after the mad race had lasted for a few minutes. "Drop to the rear, mate, and try if you can't pick off that black devil."

Now as ever Toplong obeyed his superior.

Twice he fired at Hercules, without perceptible effect, unless it was that the whistling of the grooved bullets so near his head urged the negro to increased exertions; certain it is that foot by foot he lessened the distance between them, and was whirling his huge club around his head, preparatory to hurling it at Toplong, when that worthy fired his third shot.

At the report, the black giant stumbled and fell, his roar of angry pain being greeted with loud yells of exultation by the Mountain Vultures.

But they laughed too soon. Almost immediately the negro scrambled to his feet, and once more rushed on. Still he limped perceptibly, and no longer gained upon the fugitives. He ran with the utmost gameness, but at each footstep he left bloody traces behind him, his tremendous exertions only causing the life-tide to flow more profusely.

"The Injun next!" growled Weeninx. "He's coming up, and getting his arrows ready. If he strikes a horse, all's up with us both!"

Encouraged by the success he had already met with, Toplong opened fire upon Shooting Star, but his good fortune now deserted him. Perforce he let his horse pick its own way, and the animal trod upon a loose stone which gave way beneath its weight, wrenching its ankle severely and almost hurling Toplong from the saddle, just as he pulled trigger.

The lead missed its intended mark, but still was billeted, for the Mad Hermit flung up his arms and staggered as though hard hit.

A curse of mingled rage and fear broke from Toplong as he saw that his horse was hopelessly lame.

"Down and try it afoot!" cried Weeninx.

sharply. "You are not winded, and can outrun them now."

Toplong instantly obeyed, running as only a man can run who knows that to be overtaken means certain death.

Sullenly Dirk Weeninx glanced over his shoulder. He saw that the young chief was just passing Hercules, that he was fitting an arrow to his bow. He saw no more, for at that moment Sibyl made a desperate effort to free herself from his close grasp, preferring to take the chances of a fall upon the rocky ground to remaining longer in such loathsome custody.

So sudden and unexpected was her movement that it came very near being successful. She slipped from the horse's withers and hung suspended by one arm, upon which the desperado's bony fingers closed with terrible force.

Gathering all his energies, Weeninx drew the maiden up to his level again, and no doubt would have swung her into her former position, but just then he heard a peculiar, hissing thud and his horse plunged forward with a snort of pain. The young chief had sent an arrow feather-deep into his right flank.

The end was close at hand now. Weeninx knew that his horse could not long keep its feet, and with death staring him in the face, an insane rage took possession of him.

"Curse you!" he snarled, drawing a knife from his belt. "If I can't have you nobody else shall!"

Sibyl read his terrible purpose, and with a shrill scream, again strove to free herself. Dirk Weeninx felt his grasp being torn away, and bent on a bloody revenge, made a wicked thrust at the maiden's heart.

He felt the blade enter clear to its hilt, the force of the blow tearing Sibyl free from his grasp. Then his horse reeled, on the point of falling. He leaped clear and fled at top speed, brandishing his blood-dripping knife with a demoniac yell!

CHAPTER V.

A FRIGHTFUL ORDEAL.

Down through the darkness, lighted only by the red glow of the blazing torch held by the Indian witch and the greenish glitter of the twin eyeballs that flashed like glow-worms—down, as it seemed to his overwrought brain, down through an almost fathomless depth, Dainty Lance felt himself hurled to meet a death horrible beyond imagination.

Twice he felt himself revolve in midair, then struck heavily upon his feet, the shock doubling him up until his chin struck upon his knees and his tongue was nearly bitten through. And from above, rising even higher than the fierce yells and snarls of the wild beasts in the den, the Indian witch laughed and mocked and danced upon the verge in mad ecstasy, swinging the crackling torch around her head until its ruddy rays penetrated the blackness below, and revealed to the young trapper the full horror of his situation.

Before him stood a huge grizzly bear, balanced upon its haunches, swaying gently from side to side in unison with the weaving motion of its massive forearms, like an experienced boxer seeking an opening in the guard of his

antagonist. On either side of the mountain monarch crouched a long, lithe panther, nervously sweeping the rocky floor with their tails, red lips parting from white fang, terrible claws rattling upon the stones—two monstrous cats sharpening their talons preparatory to leaping upon their prey. And from beyond, other eyes gleamed phosphorescently, other sounds were added to the diabolical chorus which suddenly burst forth in answer to the shrill invocation of the demoniac hag above.

"At him, my pets!" screamed the witch, now in reality a mad-woman, as she danced furiously upon the very verge of the platform. "Seize him, my darlings—pounce upon him beauties—tear his flesh—drink his blood—crack his bones—but not too soon. Make him suffer—make him scream and groan with anguish! Let his cries for help and mercy ring in my ears—the most delicious music! Begin the death-dance, my darlings!"

All this Dainty Lance saw and heard in the few moments which succeeded his being hurled into the den of wild beasts.

Death seemed inevitable. Even if well armed, and in the full possession of his bodily powers, he could not hope to successfully contend with so many ferocious beasts. One rush and he would be beaten down, never to rise again of his own accord. Yet it is human nature to struggle against violent death, no matter in what shape it comes, and the young trapper made a mighty effort to throw off the baleful spell that fettered his limbs while it left his senses free.

Whether it was the heavy shock of his fall, or the natural dread of the frightful doom which stared him full in the face, Dainty Lance conquered the evil influence that had rendered him helpless, and staggered to his feet, nerved to fight the ferocious beasts to the last. In one hand was a heavy bone, in the other a fragment of rock which he had mechanically grasped while rising erect. Poor weapons with which to confront such antagonists.

A screech of fierce rage burst from the lips of the beldam above as she saw this, but then came another change.

"Good! so much the better! Fight for your life, accursed pale-face! Scream and shriek as your flesh is torn to ribbons—cry for mercy as you leap and dart about in the mad dance of death! On, my darlings! At him, sweet loves! Let the rare sport begin! I am hungry for the sight of blood—my throat is parching, my brain is on fire—ha! that is it!" and her eldritch laugh rung out shriller than ever as a long, dark shape shot through the air over the head of the monstrous grizzly and alighted at the very feet of Dainty Lance.

Growing cooler and more composed with the passage of each second, Dainty Lance struck heavily at the crouching animal with both bone and stone. The dancing light deceived him, or else the beast made a movement at that precise juncture, for the missiles failed to reach their mark. Dainty Lance was overthrown by the force of his double stroke, and fairly fell upon the shaggy monster!

Instinctively he grappled with the beast, while the mad witch screamed and gibbered on the ledge above, but the animal wrested itself free

without even essaying to use either tooth or claw upon the young trapper!

Instead, it uttered a long, piercing wail, that found a full score of answers from the darkness beyond. Like shadowy phantoms as many lithe shapes darted past the larger beasts and ranged themselves before the bewildered youth, growling fiercely and snapping their armed jaws savagely—but not at the human sacrifice flung them by the Indian witch!

Their tails were turned toward Dainty Lance, and their regular front threatened the huge bear and the panthers.

No less amazed than her intended victim, the hag bent far over the pit, swinging the blazing torch above her head in order to light up the thrilling tableau below.

A gasping cry of wondering joy burst from the lips of Dainty Lance. The beast with which he had desperately grappled was bold Tarkio, the jet-black leader of the Wolf Queen's body-guard, and those ranged on each side of the superb creature were his mates, all wolves!

"They will fight in your defense as though fighting for me," Netawaka had said, and here was living evidence that her confidence in her strange pets was not misplaced.

Dainty Lance could see that the trained band meant business—that they would fight desperately in his defense until the last one was torn to pieces.

The Indian witch apparently reached the same conclusion, for a torrent of horrible imprecations burst from her lips, and she flung her blazing torch into the midst of the wolves.

Instinctively they broke ranks, but the other animals fell back as well, intimidated by the glowing missile.

Hope sprung up in the heart of Dainty Lance, and starting out from the rock wall, he snatched up the nearly extinguished brand, waving it in the air above his head until it burst anew into brilliant flame, at the same time loudly calling the name of his heart-brother.

Hardy Zeph had slept soundly all through the drugging and removal of his friend, nor did he arouse until the maniacal laugh of Kangewock as she hurled Dainty Lance into the den of wild beasts echoed wildly through the rock passages. At this, he started up and stared around him in sleepy amazement. This was changed to a sickening dread, not for himself, as he saw that his friend was gone. In an instant he was upon his feet, icy cool in nerve, though his blood was literally boiling as he realized that his heart brother had been treacherously dealt with. The belt of weapons lying upon the floor was ample proof of this, and snatching them up, drawing his own revolver as he ran, he rushed to the rescue, guided by the diabolical laughter of the insane beldam.

None too soon did he reach the scene of the impending tragedy. He saw the crouching form of the hag. A dim light from beyond and below told him that she was kneeling on the verge of some sort of pit. And then came the cry of Dainty Lance as he called upon him for aid, mingling with the snarling howls of the momentarily intimidated animals.

A terrible rage took possession of him as he dealt the ferocious hag a kick that hurled her

into the pit, midway between the cordon of wolves and the trio of fiercer beasts.

"Hyar I be, pard!" he shouted, preparing to leap into the den. "One or both, we live or die together!"

A warning cry came from behind the faithful lad, but he heard it not. With a cat-like leap he lighted beside his heart brother, thrusting the belt of weapons into his hand.

"Keep the light a-burning, but pump the lead into 'em lively!" he cried, cheerily, the report of his revolver emphasizing his words.

"The bear and panther, not the wolves—they are here, and will fight for us," hurriedly responded Dainty Lance.

Even as he spoke, one of the panthers, stung to fury by his bullet, leaped forward and struck full against his breast.

Dainty Lance saw it coming and instinctively thrust forward his blazing torch, the fiery brand fairly entering the animal's mouth. With a choking howl of pain, the creature fell back, and was instantly pounced upon by the wolves, headed by gallant Tarkio.

The tumult now was more frightful than ever, but high above the din, Dainty Lance heard and recognized the voices of Netawaka, the Wolf Queen.

"Stand up—do not resist and you are safe!"

Mechanically he obeyed, glancing upward. Something cold, and feeling like the coils of a snake, fell over his head and shoulders, instantly closing around his body. Before he could realize the truth he lost his footing and felt himself dangling against the face of the rock in mid-air.

A moment later he was drawn over the ledge and Netawaka was bending down, hastily removing the lasso noose around his body.

"Save him—my brother—or I go down again!" gasped Dainty Lance the moment he could recover breath sufficiently.

Hardy Zeph had also understood the words of the forest Amazon, and saw the dextrous lasso cast, but he had time for no more than to snatch up the torch as if dropped from the hand of his friend, for, with a savage growl, the bear dropped upon all-fours and plunged toward him.

Twice his revolver spoke, the second time so close to the grizzly front of the maddened beast that the burning powder singed the hair between the bear's eyes, and then Hardy Zeph leaped swiftly aside.

Once more he raised his pistol, but, ere he could fire it, the second panther made its leap, striking him on the left shoulder, and knocking him down. Luckily the claws of the beast did not fasten upon him fairly, else the brave lad would never have left that horrible den alive. As it was, he scrambled to his feet just in time for Netakawa to fling the noose of her lasso over his head.

By the light of the torch which Hardy Zeph still held, though the blaze had been extinguished by his fall, Netawaka could see that the noose had closed around the young trapper's throat.

"Slip it down over your shoulders!" she cried, aloud.

"No time—haul away—I'll risk it!" he shouted, hurriedly, leaping aside as both bear and panther made a rush at him, discharging a pistol in the face of one and dealing the other a fierce blow on the head with his clubbed torch.

Longer delay would almost certainly be fatal, and both the Wolf Queen and Dainty Lance hauled away upon the lasso.

As he felt the noose tighten about his throat, Hardy Zeph dropped his splintered torch and grasped the rope above his head instead, thus lessening the dangerous pressure. Drawn from his feet, he swung heavily against the wall. The shock knocked the pistol from his hand. He heard a fierce, snarling cry, and instinctively felt that the maddened panther was once more making its leap. It came, but the true friends above were not idle. Swiftly they drew in the rope, and the furious beast only struck the young trapper on the feet, then fell back amidst the snarling, snapping wolves.

In another moment Hardy Zeph was drawn over the ledge, and found himself tightly clasped in the arms of Dainty Lance.

CHAPTER VI.

DARING DEEDS.

A SHRILL, angry screech from the darkness below cut short the embrace of the heart brothers, and drew an exclamation of recollection from the lips of the Wolf Queen.

"Kangewock—my grandmother—the animals are crazed now—they will not obey her, they will tear her to pieces!"

Bending far over the edge of the pit, she cast the rays of her torch down into the horrible den, lighting up the scene.

Fortunately for the Indian witch, perhaps, the heavy kick dealt her by Hardy Zeph, added to her fall, had deprived her of sensibility for the time being. She lay motionless through the brief but fierce fight which followed the bold advent of Hardy Zeph, rousing up at the clear cry of the Wolf Queen, but was unable to realize the whole truth until Dainty Lance was rescued and Zeph was dangling in mid-air.

She scrambled to her feet with a screech of frantic fury, as she saw the failure of the panther's desperate leap. Her insane rage seemed impartially divided between the human beings above and the four-footed creatures below.

"At them, you lazy cravens! Leap up and drag them down—tear them limb from limb—suck their blood and crack their bones! Leap, you cowardly curs—up and at 'em!"

The faithful wolves were still fighting with the two panthers, the first of which was already at its last gasp, while the other was plainly overmatched by numbers.

As soon as Kangewock realized this, she drew her knife and leaped into the midst of the *melee*, cutting and slashing on every side with the tireless fury of a demoniac, foaming at the mouth and giving vent to most discordant cries.

This was a suicidal act, as those above could not help seeing.

"The lasso! it may be in time!" panted Netawaka, leaping to where the rawhide rope lay.

Swift as thought and certain as fate, the lasso was cast, the noose settling fairly over the head

"Kangewock and drawn tight. Hastily the

young trappers added their strength to that of Netawaka, only to fall back heavily as the strain upon the rope abruptly relaxed.

Whether by accident or intentionally, the Indian witch in madly brandishing her blood-reeking blade, had severed the rope above her head, and now lay in the midst of the howling, snapping wolves.

A single glance Netawaka took. It showed her this. It showed her the long shape of the panther launching forward. It showed her the huge bear plunging headlong into the *melee*. And as a piercing screech of mingled rage and agony came up from the lips of her grandmother, she leaped boldly into the frightful den, torch in one hand, bow and arrow in the other.

So sudden was her action that it took the young trappers completely by surprise. Before they could fairly realize the startling truth, Netawaka had recovered her balance, thrust her blazing torch into a crevice in the wall, fitted an arrow to the string and sent the feathered shaft hissing upon its mission, burying it deep between the ribs of the panther as it crouched upon the writhing form of old Kangewock.

Then she uttered a shrill, clear cry of command that was instantly obeyed by such of the wolves as could crawl. They cleared themselves from the *melee* and surrounded their young mistress, a cordon that only death could break.

"I cain't see that an' stay yer'" grated Hardy Zeph, grasping his remaining revolver and leaping from the ledge just as Netawaka let fly her second arrow.

In the obscurity he alighted upon the body of one of the wolves slain by the old woman, and pitching forward, his revolver flew from his hand.

A warning cry came simultaneously from Netawaka and Dainty Lance. Hardy Zeph glanced over his shoulder and saw the huge bear nearly upon him, its white teeth rattling as its powerful jaws clashed together.

That glance told him he would not have time to avoid the onset, and drawing his knife, he prepared for the dread encounter.

An arrow hissed over his head so close that it ruffled his hair, then buried itself to the feather in the massive chest.

At the same instant Dainty Lance, realizing the full extent of the peril that threatened his heart-brother, leaped from the ledge above, alighting feet first fairly upon the body of the bear.

His lowered heels struck squarely upon the animal's spine, and produced the effect calculated upon. The bear collapsed under the shock, its hind-quarters temporarily paralyzed, its long fore-claws barely touching Hardy Zeph as it struck out viciously, roaring most horribly.

Cat-like, Dainty Lance rebounded to the floor without losing his balance, and snatching up the revolver dropped by Zeph, poured bullet after bullet into the huge creature's ear.

At the same time Hardy Zeph was driving his long blade again and again into the side of the monster, until it sunk down, dead.

Until now they neither had had time to give a glance toward Netawaka, but now they saw that she no longer had need of their aid. Her

second shot had cut short the panther's thread of life, and she was now bending over the unconscious but still living Kangewock.

"She is alive, but death is hovering over her," she said gently as Hardy Zeph came to her side. "Her pet panther did its work before I could kill it."

"She fell into the very trap she set for me," said Dainty Lance, who would not pretend a sorrow he did not feel.

He had suffered too much while under the influence of that subtle drug to feel forgiveness so soon.

"She is my grandmother, and dying," softly added the Wolf Queen. "She is very old, and many wrongs done her by your people have unsettled her brain."

"We'll help you all we kin," said Hardy Zeph. "But how to git her out o' this p'izen hole, I don't see."

"There is an easy way out. Collect your weapons, and then one of you hold the torch to light the way."

By aid of the blazing fagot, the scattered weapons were soon recovered and all found to be in working order.

The Wolf Queen raised the bruised and bleeding form of the Indian witch in her arms, then led the way to the rear of the foul-smelling den, where the red light soon discovered a rude but substantial door, secured by heavy bolts let into the solid rock jambs. By her direction Hardy Zeph removed these and swung the door inward, revealing a narrow flight of rudely cut stone steps, leading to the level of the rock chambers above.

In a few moments more, the party reached the rude apartment set aside for the use of the Indian witch.

Netawaka placed Kangewock upon the pallet of skins, then closely inspected her injuries. These were numerous and so severe that it seemed almost a miracle the old woman still drew the breath of life. The young trappers interchanged quick glances. They felt assured she would never recover consciousness.

In this belief Dainty Lance began to soften toward his almost murderer, and lent Netawaka all the aid in his power. With a celerity and steady nerve remarkable in one so young, the Wolf Queen cleansed the many hurts of her grandmother, then anointed and bound them up with simples collected by the beldame herself.

The effect was almost magical. Kangewock opened her eyes, and as they fell upon the faces of the young trappers, she thrust Netawaka's hand aside and rose unaided to a sitting posture, still malignant, intense hatred ringing in every tone of her voice as she poured forth a flood of curses and maledictions upon the abhorred pale-faces.

Iron nerved though they were, our heroes shrunk back from the madwoman, shocked by such malevolence in one who was even then tottering on the verge of the grave.

"Go, and leave her to me," hurriedly uttered the Wolf Queen. "Go, but do not leave the cavern. Await me in the room where we ate supper. Go—the sight of your faces makes her worse."

In silence the young trappers retreated to the rock chamber from which Dainty Lance had been removed so strangely.

"A strange night's work, mate," said Dainty Lance with a faint smile, as he crouched over the glowing embers. "The chances were a thousand to one against us, yet here we are, none the worse save for a few scratches that a playful kitten might easily make."

"You don't reckon *she'll* git over it, do ye?" and Hardy Zeph scratched his head dubiously as he stared into the fire.

"I could almost pray not—the venomous old hag!" growled Dainty Lance, viciously poking the glowing coals. "The devil is in her, bigger than a hay-stack. But you saw how wonderfully her strength was restored? She must have as many lives as a wildcat!"

Hardy Zeph hove a sigh that seemed to come from the very soles of his feet. Dainty Lance looked at him curiously. The young trapper flushed hotly as he met the gaze, and there was trace of sheepishness in his voice as he said:

"I was jist thinkin' what a gay old gran-mother-in-law the p'izen critter would make a feller, s'posin' sech a hitch-up could be brung about!"

Whatever response Dainty Lance might have made was checked by the appearance of the Wolf Queen, still followed by her faithful body-guard.

"I wish I could tell you how sorry I am that all this has happened," she said, her voice low and sad, a wistful light in her dark eyes as they rested upon the face of Dainty Lance. "I never dreamed that one of her bad spells—"

"Pray say no more," a little coldly interposed Lance. "We do not blame you. You risked your life to save ours. Only for you, we must bot have perished in that foul den."

"Durn the odds!" cried Zeph, flinging his cap violently to the floor and stepping forward, a resolute light in his gray eyes. "Lady, you see all they is to me. I hain't got no book l'arnin'; I'm rough an' ugly as a mud fence, staked an' doubl' ridered with tadpoles—but underneath the outside shuck, I kerry a heart that never yit weat back on a pledge. We hain't knowed each other long, but in that little time we've hed a heap o' fun—we've helped each other in a p'izen tight pinch—we know that each hes got a craw chuck full o' pure soul—an' I know that I love you harder than a mule kin kick frozen punkins down hill! Mind ye, lady, I don't ax ye for a flat-footed answer *now*. Think it over. Look at it from all p'ints. Weigh the idee keerfully—an' here's hopin' some good angel'll push down heavy on the side o' the scales you chuck me into!"

At his first words, Netawaka drew back, cresting her proud head haughtily, but as he continued she noted his deep earnestness, she read the whole truth in his honest eyes, and knew that a diamond, in the rough, but pure and without a flaw, was being humbly placed at her feet.

Hardy Zeph turned away as he concluded, clearly fearing that if he allowed her to reply now his faint hopes of success would certainly be blighted.

The Wolf Queen followed him with her eyes

for a moment, then once more turned toward Dainty Lance.

"I thank you for your kind words. I feared you might think I was a party to her attack—that I had lured you hither the more surely to encompass your death. Believe me, I was sincere in what I told you. I believed then, and I believe now, that my grandmother is in possession of the knowledge you seek. If so, that knowledge shall be yours—I pledge you my sacred honor!"

"You think, then, that she—your grandmother—will live!"

"I hope and pray so!" fervently responded the Wolf Queen. "It may sound strange to you, after what has transpired this night, but I speak only the truth when I say that I love her very dearly. She was not always as you have seen her—but never mind, you are not interested in what only concerns myself."

"It may be days before I can gain the knowledge you seek, or it may only be a few hours; I cannot say. You can remain here—"

Dainty Lance shivered involuntarily. Netawaka smiled faintly.

"You are right. It will be better for you to seek some other hiding-place, but each day at sunset be at the rock-ledge where I fought Walking Buzzard and White Wolf. It is there I will seek you when I have learned all."

"Now one word of warning. My tribe is called at peace with your people, but there are ever many young braves who glory in taking white scalps wherever they find them. If you would succeed you must be cautious. Here is dried meat in plenty. Take what you can carry. Then you will not need to hunt for your food. Lie close under cover. Only venture forth when you visit the rock ledge. It is for your good that I speak."

The young trappers supplied themselves with provisions, then the Wolf Queen led them along the dark and winding passage to the outer air, where she bade them farewell.

"Be as easy as you kin on me, lady," uttered Hardy Zeph, pleadingly, then without awaiting a reply, he darted away through the darkness, closely followed by Dainty Lance, leaving Netawaka to return to the nursing of her insane grandmother.

CHAPTER VII.

AN UNCOMPROMISING LOVER.

THREE cries followed swiftly after that despairing shriek from the lips of the Snow Sprite—shouts of mingled horror and vengeance. Her falling form—the blood-dripping weapon brandished by Dirk Weeninx as he fled at break-neck speed—his yell of demoniac triumph—all urged the three pursuers on to increased speed, for the moment unmindful of their injuries.

Racing like scared wolves, the Mountain Vultures leaped and dodged among or over the thick-lying boulders, knowing that only speed of foot and great endurance could save them from a death-grapple, unless their pursuers should halt and lose time over the fallen maiden.

A howl of angry pain burst from the lips of Dirk Weeninx, and one hand swiftly flew to the side of his head, red blood staining his hairy hand and trickling down his bony wrist. It

clenched to him as though a red-hot iron had been applied to his ear.

The young chief bent his bow almost double and let loose an arrow just before reaching the spot where Sibyl lay, blood staining the bosom of her dress. He saw the Mountain Vulture leap spasmodically, like a young horse under the first touch of a keen spur, as the arrow tore its way through one of the assassin's out-standing ears; then a huge boulder shut off his further view.

He cast aside his bow and knelt beside the maiden, whom he believed dead. He could see where the cruel knife had ripped open her dress across the bosom. The red blood-stains were rapidly spreading. Her eyes were closed, her face white and seemingly already fixed in death.

Hercules passed them by, a deep howl parting his lips as he saw his idolized mistress lying so white and still. Straight on he rushed, resolved to terribly avenge that dastard blow.

The hermit paused beside Shooting Star. He too was agitated, but not to such great extent. Deftly he examined the wound, and soon pronounced it a merely superficial one.

"The scoundrel meant thorough work, but he blundered in the execution," he said, coldly, extending his examination. "He struck as she was falling, and his blade did little more than break the skin."

Such was indeed the fact. Upon the white, delicate skin could be seen the imprint of Dirk's fist, and this it was that made him believe that he had driven his long blade to its haft in the bosom of the Snow Sprite.

The hermit bound up her wound, then Shooting Star raised the maiden in his strong arms and bore her back to the skin lodge that served as their home.

Late that night Hercules returned, sullen and weak from loss of blood. He had followed the Mountain Vultures in his crippled condition until the growing darkness enabled them to give him the slip among the rocky recesses.

The young chief in person led a squad of braves in search of the ruffians, keeping up the quest for several days, but without success.

Thus a week passed by.

At the end of that time Sibyl was nearly recovered from her injuries. So, too, had the Mad Hermit and Hercules.

More than once the maiden caught herself wishing that Dirk Weeninx had been surer when he aimed that blow at her heart. Then her troubles on earth would have been ended. Now—

She was thinking thus when the Mad Hermit entered the lodge where she was reclining upon a pallet of skins.

With his foot he stirred the fire into a bright glow, then sat down beside her. Neither spoke, but, as Sibyl glanced up into his stern face, and saw the fixed lips, the firm-set jaws, the frown that only seemed to deepen the fire in his eyes, a cold thrill crept over her frame, for a subtle instinct told her that this was the crisis.

An oppressive silence reigned until it was broken by a light, rapid footstep without. The door-flap was raised, and a figure entered, arrayed in gay feathers and bead-work. It was

the young chief, Shooting Star, and the maiden's heart sunk still lower as she noted the care with which his person had been adorned.

She knew then the nature of the blow which threatened her.

Mechanically she made a motion to arise, but a strong hand clasped her arm, and the hermit spoke:

"The time for trifling is past, girl. You have turned a deaf ear to my pleading and reasoning. Now I mean to command, and you must obey."

Sibyl glanced toward the young chief, almost appealingly, but, whatever hope she may have entertained from that quarter died a speedy death.

His eyes sunk before hers, and his bronzed cheek grew a shade darker; but that was all. He seated himself on the side of the fire opposite them, filled and lighted his pipe, sending out the scented vapor in quick, deep puffs. And there was a dogged expression upon his features that caused Sibyl to avert her eyes. Clearly there was nothing to be hoped for from that quarter.

"This night you must plight your troth, and to-morrow you shall be married," added the old man, coldly.

A quick light flashed into the eyes of the Snow Sprite, her pale face flushed, there was an indignant ring in her voice as she made reply:

"To end as the other solemn pledge did—in murder?"

The words were bitter, and that the hermit felt the sting contained therein, was plain from his changing features. But his voice was as cold and even as ever when he spoke:

"You have saved me the trouble of broaching that subject. There was no murder done, though I am sorry now that my heart failed me in carrying out my first intention. The matter would have been ended forever then. Now, the young rascal is bent on making trouble—"

"He is alive—Lancelot Daintree?" faltered Sibyl.

"At present, yes; how long he will remain so depends almost wholly on you."

Sibyl gazed at the hermit in doubting surprise, but ere she could shape words to express her thoughts, the old man resumed:

"I mean what I say. There is a barrier between you two that can never be overpassed. One word from my lips would prove this, but I cannot speak that word. To do so would be my death-warrant—would be fatal to you and him and many others. The horrible secret has been buried for years—it shall not be unearthed now. When he learns that you are another man's wife, his pursuit will cease. He will go his own way and leave us to go ours."

"He will never learn that," said Sibyl, in a low, resolute tone. "With your sanction, we pledged our hands and hearts. Heaven helping me, I will never be false to that vow. Rather than wed any but Lancelot Daintree I will become the bride of death."

"It will be *his* death, not yours. Listen! Those two hot-headed boys have come here in quest of you. How they found and followed our trail I know not. They are here, hiding and prowling around, either knowing or suspecting your presence here. At a word from

me a hundred stout braves will take the war-path against them, to capture and kill or torture as I command them. If you are obstinate, I swear that word shall be uttered. Lancelot Daintree may see the rising, but will never witness the setting of another sun, unless you consent to marry the young chief, here, Shooting Star.

"The bond must be a legal one—I have taken care that it shall be so. A missionary has been living and working to the north of this, among the Plain Crees. I sent out a party of braves to bring him here. Just now a runner came in, reporting the complete success of the expedition. The priest will be here by noon to-morrow and immediately after his arrival he will perform the ceremony uniting you two as man and wife."

"I will tell him the truth—he will refuse to prostitute his sacred office!" passionately cried Sibyl.

"And by so doing, doom Lancelot Daintree to certain death, preceded by torture the most diabolical that Indian ingenuity can invent," coldly interposed the hermit. "One of those two—a wedding or a death—can avert the catastrophe that threatens us all. You must choose between them. You have until to-morrow noon to decide."

With these words he turned and left the lodge.

For a few moments Sibyl lay upon the pallet of skin, her face buried in her hands, half stunned by the parting words of the man whom she had been taught to call father. But then a faint hope began to dawn in her heart as she heard the slight noise caused by Shooting Star uneasily shifting his seat. Once before he had given her proof of a native nobility of soul such as is rarely met with among savages; might not a fresh appeal to him prove successful?

The Snow Sprite raised her head, but her heart sunk again as her gaze rested upon the face of the chief. His eyes drooped before her steady look, but there was a hard-set expression upon his features that boded ill for her success.

"Chief, you will have pity upon me?" she uttered, arising and passing around the fire to his side. "You heard what he—my father—said? There is another brave to whom my heart is given, one whom I have pledged myself to wed. You would not have me forswear myself? You would not claim a bride whose heart belongs to another?"

"The White Medicine is an old and very wise man," returned the half-breed, evasively. "He says that love will come after marriage—that when the missionary gives you to me, your heart will all be mine, and your thoughts will no longer follow his enemy."

Sibyl flushed hotly, her eyes flashing.

"No one can force me to marry where my heart has not first gone. I do not love you—I never can, never will."

"My love is great enough for us both, I do not ask much. It will be enough if I have you in my lodge. I can look at you. Sometimes you will smile. That will be sweeter to me than fond kisses from the lips of any other woman."

"You are easily satisfied," and despite herself,

Sibyl could not entirely smother a smile; but this was only for a moment. "But even that is more than you will be granted. I will never enter your lodge."

"Remember what your father said. You can never marry that man, so why not make the best of it? Try and forget him, then all will be well. He will keep his scalp upon his head, and in time find some one else to keep his lodge fire burning. A dead man is no good. Even your love would fail to warm him."

The young chief knocked the ashes from his pipe and rose to his feet, with the air of one who had uttered an unanswerable argument.

"See, I am a man," he added, spreading wide his arms and proudly confronting the Snow Sprite. "I am a chief now; when Kekionga dies, then I will be the head of my tribe. A thousand warriors will be your slaves—but of them all, none will be more devoted or love you better than I."

"You are wasting both time and breath," cried Sibyl, passionately, "I will never marry you—I would sooner drive this knife to your heart!"

"Strike!" and Shooting Star bared his broad bosom to the threatening steel. "I would sooner receive death from your hand than life from that of another!"

For one instant his life hung trembling in the balance. The keen blade hung quivering in the air. Hunted, desperate, the Snow Sprite was strongly tempted to deal the blow that would forever rid her of his pretensions. Had he shown the slightest trace of fear, the weapon would have found its sheath in his heart.

Instead, Sibyl turned the blade toward her own bosom.

"Go! leave me, or I will kill myself—I swear it!"

The young chief saw that she was in deadly earnest; the weapon was touching her breast; and knowing that he could arrest the blow by no other means, he silently bowed his head and left the lodge.

CHAPTER VIII.

INTO THE SNARE.

WITH the evanishment of Shooting Star, the spirit which had thus far sustained Sibyl, abruptly yielded, and she sank down upon the pile of furs and skins, burying her face in her hands and sobbing as though her heart would break. She had undergone so many trials of late that it was little wonder she gave way now.

The strangely-blended past flashed before her memory now. She recalled the wild, romantic life she had led for years, longer than she could remember. Then Lancelot Daintree crossed her path. From saving his life, she grew to love him with all the passionate ardor of her untamed heart. From frowning, the man who called her daughter, smiled upon their love. Then came that awful, never-to-be-forgotten betrothal feast. From the very pinnacle of bliss she had been plunged into the depths of bitter despair. For weeks she had mourned Dainty Lance as forever lost to her. Even if alive, which she did not dare hope, he could never find her in this remote region.

On this night she learned that her lover—her

betrothed husband—was alive and well; that he was near at hand, searching for her. He had followed her from that far-away icy home—but only to meet a cruel death unless she could bring herself to sacrifice all that she held dear on earth.

A bitter, sobbing cry burst from her lips.

"Oh, Lance, my darling! if you only knew!"

Abruptly Sibyl raised her head and pushed the long, tangled locks of golden hair back from her brow, listening breathlessly, an eager light in her tear-dimmed eyes.

A cautious sound had come to her ears. Something or somebody was tapping against the skin lodge, just beyond where her head had been resting.

A wild hope found birth in her heart as Sibyl heard the signal repeated.

"Lance—my husband—is it indeed you?"

The words fell almost unconsciously from her lips, but they betrayed the nature of the newborn hope.

The gentle tapping sound ceased, and as Sibyl gazed she saw a knife-point pierce the stout hide. She saw it move slowly downward, then at right angles, ceasing only when an aperture large enough to permit the passage of a human being had been formed. The knife-point vanished and a human face was cautiously thrust into the opening.

For one breathless moment the Snow Sprite gazed upon the face, then her glad hope died away, and she bowed her head once more, heartsick and faint. The face was not that of Dainty Lance, but of an utter stranger.

Noiselessly the stranger entered the lodge, and passing by the maiden, proceeded to secure the skin door-flap by pinning it firmly to the ground with the stout pegs provided for that purpose. Now none could enter the lodge without considerable trouble: most certainly not without the knowledge of the present inmates.

This precaution taken, the stranger turned to Sibyl and sat down beside her upon the pallet of skins. The startled maiden shrunk away and would have cried aloud in alarm, only for the hand which was swiftly pressed upon her lips.

"I am your friend—I come to serve you!"

Sibyl's eyes rather than her ears reassured her. By the red glow of the fire she saw that her strange visitor was a woman, despite her masculine size and garb. It was indeed Netawaka, the Wolf Queen.

"You are a woman. I am not afraid," said Sibyl, softly. "You say you are a friend, but I do not remember ever seeing you before."

"I have seen you. My eyes have watched you often when you thought you were all alone. I have seen you with *him*—with the young chief, Shooting Star."

There was a sound in the voice of the Amazon that startled Sibyl as she uttered the name of the Indian, and the suspicion that cadence gave birth to was confirmed by the peculiar light in those great dark eyes. An eager light filled her own eyes, for she believed she had found an ally.

"You was watching him in here! You heard what we said?"

"Yes, I was watching. See! I had an arrow

notched and my bow ready bent. The point covered your heart. If you had yielded—if you had given him the least sign of accepting his love—you would have died at his feet."

"You love him, then?"

"Yes—he is my heart, my soul. I learned to love him long before you came here. Only for your snow-face—"

"He must be blind, to look at me twice after seeing you!" said Sibyl, and she was in earnest when she spoke, and her eyes dwelt in wondering admiration upon the physical perfection beside her. "You are the most fit for a warrior's wife. You and he would make a splendid couple. Did he ever tell you so?"

"No," said Netawaka, her bright eyes drooping, her face flushing, and her noble bosom heaving rapidly. "He never looked at me, that I know. I never came to the village, and I have been afraid to meet him face to face outside, ever since the little bird woke up and began to sing in my heart. But he would have seen me soon—he would have heard the bird sing—only for your coming."

"You say you were 'watching us—then you must have heard what I told him. I can never love him, for I love another."

"I know," and the Wolf Queen laughed softly. "I knew that before you spoke—"

Sibyl tried to speak, but only a gasping sob came from her lips as she stared wildly into the smiling face that hung over her. What she read there fairly stilled her heart and paralyzed her tongue.

"Dainty Lance—is not that the name?" whispered Netawaka, as her strong arms stole around the maiden and drew her head down upon her bosom. "I have seen him—he is well—he is near, waiting to bear you away to his lodge, where you will be happy as the day is long," the Wolf Queen murmured softly, like a mother soothing her child.

A wiser course she could not have pursued. Poor Sibyl had been so terribly tried that without this mesmeric influence she might, and probably would, have given way to the hysterical impulse that caused her frame to quiver like a storm-tossed leaf. If so, the watchful ears without would have taken the alarm and all hopes of flight been frustrated.

In her low, soothing voice, Netawaka told Sibyl how she had made the acquaintance of Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph, and how they came to confide in her and accept her as an ally.

"I did not know then that I would be serving myself, as well," said the Amazon, softly laughing. "I will help you to escape. You will marry your white lover. Shooting Star will be mad for a little while, but then his eyes will open again and he may look upon Netawaka kindly."

"He will—I am sure of it," eagerly said Sibyl. "Only take me to Lancelot and we will pray night and day that you two may come together and be as happy as we. Can you—will you help me escape?"

The Wolf Queen hesitated, but it was only for a moment. Though several days had elapsed since she learned for sure that Sibyl was here, she had not told the boy trappers of her discovery, for reasons which may be inferred from

her own words already given. Still she knew where to find them and a more favorable opportunity of ridding herself of a dangerous rival might not again present itself.

"He said the priest would be here to-morrow; unless I can escape to-night it will be forever too late," added Sibyl.

"You shall escape to-night," said the Wolf Queen, decisively. "Get ready. Wrap a robe around you. Your dress is too light. Some keen eye might catch sight of it as we are stealing away. I will go out and see if the coast is clear."

The Wolf Queen stooped and listened beside the severed skin for a moment. No suspicious sound came to her ears, and parting the edges, she noiselessly glided out from the lodge.

Sibyl stared with an air of alarm as she raised a robe. A low, scuffling sound came from outside the tent, and for a moment she believed that her new-found ally had been discovered stealing from the lodge. If so, she knew that all was lost.

But no further sounds came, and she completed her preparations for flight. A few minutes later, there came a faint tapping upon the lodge, and the skin flap was partially raised as the voice of the Wolf Queen bade her come.

She crept forth—only to have rough hands seize her, and a heavy blanket wrapped suffocatingly around her head.

She had been betrayed into the hands of her worst enemies!

CHAPTER IX.

THE SWOOP OF THE MOUNTAIN VULTURES.

EAVESDROPPING appeared to be the rule upon that eventful night, for Netawaka, the Wolf Queen, was not the only person thus occupied.

While the ardent search for them lasted, Dirk Weeninx and Ham Toplong lay low in the secure retreat they had found, only venturing forth when the want of food rendered such exposure imperative. Fortune favored them, and the death-hunt died away without their being found.

Narrow as their escape had been, the Mountain Vultures had no thought of abandoning their evil plans.

"We can afford to run some risk," said Dirk Weeninx, "since there is a fortune awaiting us both. The old fellow has a whole gold mine hidden away somewhere, and once let us get that dainty girl fairly in our hands, and he will come down heavy with the ransom money."

Ham Toplong made no reply, but there was a peculiar glitter in his wolfish eyes that told his brain was not idle. Weeninx did not notice this, and even if he had, it would have caused him little uneasiness. His word was law to Toplong. Whatever he said was right.

Greed of gold was not the only sentiment that occupied the thoughts of Dirk Weeninx. His animal passions were strong, and they grew uncontrollable when he first set eyes upon Netawaka, the Wolf Queen. He swore then that she should be his, and promptly insulted the Amazon by asking her to become his squaw. Nothing daunted by the rebuff she gave him, he tried bolder measures, only to fail, as has already been shown. Each failure only made him the

more determined to succeed, though he finally concluded to make sure of Sibyl and the ransom money first.

By cautious scouting and spying, he learned where Sibyl was lodged, and on this night he and his comrade in evil, Ham Toplong, on their newly acquired horses, rode as near the village as they deemed prudent, then dismounted, secured their animals and stole forward through the darkness on foot.

Long practice had made them almost perfect as scouts and spies. Not the faintest sound betrayed their passage over the frozen ground, and they drew near to the lodge which they had marked down without arousing any suspicion.

Dirk Weeninx was in the lead, and he suddenly paused, flattening his form close to the ground.

The door of the lodge opened and a tall form emerged, the red light from within falling for a moment upon his handsome form and face. Both of the Mountain Vultures recognized him, with a look and muttered curse of hate.

It was the young chief, Shooting Star.

Waiting until his tall form vanished in the darkness, the outlaws crept silently around the lodge, though still at a goodly distance, meaning to approach it from the rear.

Here another surprise awaited them. They saw a human shape crawling into the lodge, through a hole cut in the skins.

"Ten to one it's that cursed boy!" grated Dirk Weeninx, his eyes flashing venomously. "He's trying to steal away the girl! If it is—durned if I don't send a bullet through his brain, even if we have to run for it!"

His blood on fire with hate and the lust of revenge, he crawled toward the lodge, placing his eye to the cut in the skins just as the Wolf Queen seated herself beside the sobbing maiden.

The Mountain Vulture's surprise was only equaled by his joy as he recognized the forest Amazon. Only by gripping his throat firmly with one hand while the other was pressed over his lips, could he smother the cry of grim delight that would surely have betrayed him else.

At a glance he recognized his advantage. The stealthy manner in which Netawaka had gained admission to the lodge plainly showed that she desired her visit to remain unsuspected by all save the maiden. Naturally she would make her retreat in the same manner when she had accomplished the object of her call. And if so, Dirk Weeninx was resolved to take her captive, even if by so doing he must abandon his former purpose.

Eagerly he listened to their words, and when he learned the reason why Netawaka had taken such a course, he drew back and told Toplong what he had determined upon. A little to his surprise, that worthy did not raise a single objection, only saying:

"We kin take her, then come back for the other one."

Removing the heavy blanket from his shoulders, and motioning Toplong to imitate his example, Weeninx crouched close against the lodge and waited for the Wolf Queen to come forth.

Fortune seemed to favor them at every point. They heard Netawaka declare that she would

assist Sibyl to escape, and add that she would venture forth in advance to make sure that the coast was clear and no persons prowling inconveniently near.

The moment she was fairly clear of the lodge, Weeninx flung his blanket over her head, his hands tightly clasping her throat, his whole weight resting upon her body as she was forced flat to the ground. Toplong secured her lower limbs and held them motionless until his comrade had choked the Wolf Queen into a state of semi-insensibility.

When satisfied that Netawaka was unable to utter a sound by way of alarm, the Mountain Vultures raised her between them and bore her rapidly but silently away to the spot where they had left their horses.

"You stay by her here, Toplong," said Dirk. "I'll tie her hands behind her to make sure, or you might think a young earthquake had kicked you on end—so! keep the blanket around her head. Don't let her yell out, or we'll have the whole tribe on our backs."

"Better tie an' gag her, then I kin go 'long. You'll need help with the other gal," suggested Toplong.

"She's only a baby alongside this beauty; I can manage it easily enough. But mind, use her as easy as you can. That's the future Mrs. Dirk Weeninx!"

Chuckles in high glee, the Mountain Vulture stole back to complete his dastardly work.

He crept up to the lodge and tapped gently, when he had thus attracted Sibyl's attention, he imitated the voice of the Wolf Queen, whispering:

"Come—the coast is clear—there is no time to lose."

Unsuspiciously Sibyl crept through the opening, only to fall into the hands of the worst enemy the world contained for her. A relentless grasp was fastened upon her throat, cutting short the mechanical cry of alarm that arose to her lips. Strong arms encompassed her form, raising her from the ground, and then her senses fled as she was borne swiftly away through the darkness.

"You've killed her—durn ye!" grated Toplong, as he bent over the form carelessly dropped at his feet.

There was an unusual fierceness in his tone that unconsciously startled Weeninx for the instant, but then he attributed it to the fear that the golden ransom would be lost if the girl was dead.

"She's only fainted. Good enough, too. It'll save us some trouble in getting away. Help me lift this beauty into the saddle—so! A glorious armful—and all mine from this time on! Better than a gold mine, if I do say it!"

The Mountain Vulture seemed almost beside himself with brutal exultation as he and Toplong raised the Wolf Queen to the saddle and bound her in position by a rope passed around her waist and the pommel. She was conscious, but the blanket was still wound around her head, her hands were bound behind her, and great as was her strength, she knew that any attempt to escape at present would only render her situation worse.

Weeninx handed Sibyl, still unconscious, up

to Toplong, then mounted behind the Wolf Queen and rode away from the dangerous proximity to the village.

For nearly an hour they proceeded in silence, forced to ride slowly by the intense darkness, then Toplong called a halt in a curiously dogged tone:

"We've got out o' hearin' o' the Injuns now, an' I reckon afore we go any furder we mought as well come to a sort o' understandin', old man."

Weeninx drew rein in astonishment. Never before had Toplong ventured to assert himself thus. Under any other circumstances he would hardly have yielded as far as he did now, but the possession of his coveted prize rendered him unusually amiable.

"If I hadn't drank the last drop of whisky myself, I'd think you was drunk, Toplong. What settlement? And why now? Why not wait until we reach the den?"

"Beca'se I don't choose," surlily retorted the mutineer. "I want the thing settled now, where you cain't play no tricks onto me. We're all the same color in the dark, an' I'm just as good a man as you be. In the light, whar I kin see your eyes, somehow I don't hardly dast to say my soul's my own. It's different now."

"Spit it out, old man," said Weeninx lightly, but at the same time drawing a revolver and holding it in readiness for instant use. "What are you growling about?"

"You got that Injun gal, an' you say you're goin' to make her your squaw?" blurted out Ham Toplong.

"Yes; what is that to you?" sharply demanded Weeninx.

"Not a durned thing. She's too hefty for me, an' then my fancy never didn't run to sech as her. Lick thunder out of a feller, fu'st thing. But we got another gal. That makes one fer each, don't it?"

Dirk Weeninx uttered a long, low whistle of unmitigated surprise. He had been rapidly revolving in his mind all possible causes of discontent which Toplong could be dwelling upon, but his thoughts never once turned in this direction.

"You know what we took her for," he said, gravely. "She is worth her weight in gold to us, if we play the game right. But much as he thinks of her, the old man wouldn't buy her back in a damaged condition."

"We kin play bugs onto him, somehow," doggedly responded Toplong. "I don't say I won't give her up, after a time. Mebbe I won't like married life as well as I think I will. Then we kin pass her off on the old coon. He won't hev time to know, fer of course we've got to finger the ding-bats afore we let go our grip on her."

"But let that be as it may—I don't keer a tinker's cuss! I'm going to hev the gal as long as my fancy fer her lasts, an' you cain't git around it. Ef you say no, whar I say yes, then thar's only one way to settle it. Git down off o' your hoss, an' we'll fight it out, the best man takin' the hull caboodle!"

"Slow an' easy, old man!" laughed Weeninx, good-humoredly. "We've used together too long for us to quarrel now over a girl. Let it be as you say. Do what you will with her. No

doubt we can bamboozle the old man just the same, when the time comes. Shake hands and let the thing drop."

He pressed his horse forward and bent over in the saddle, extending his hand. Toplong grasped it without suspecting treachery, so honest sounded the voice of the Vulture.

But even while pressing his hand warmly, Dirk Weeninx thrust forward his other hand, armed with a revolver, and discharged the weapon when its muzzle fairly touched the temple of his comrade in evil.

A flash—a muffled report—and the dispute was ended forever!

CHAPTER X.

THE TABLES TURNED.

NOT a sound came from the lips of the murdered outlaw so suddenly was he slain. His skull was terribly shattered and his brain left bare by the treacherous shot.

A sharp cry of horror broke from Sibyl, whose senses had returned during the ride. Clotted blood and brains were sprinkled over her face as Dirk Weeninx sought to steady the dead man in his saddle and control the startled horse at the same time.

His own animal was frightened, and as the body of the assassinate Vulture reeled in that direction, the creature sprung aside. The dead man fell headlong to the ground, and with it fell the Snow Sprite.

Quick as thought she was upon her feet again and seeking safety in flight.

A frightful curse broke from the lips of Dirk Weeninx as he leaped to the ground. Swiftly he knotted both bridle reins together, then darted away in rapid pursuit of the fleeing maiden. He could just catch a glimpse of her white dress as she fled through the darkness. She had flung aside the heavy blanket in which Ham Toplong had enveloped her, as an incumbrance, little thinking that she was thus insuring her recapture.

One brief minute of torturing suspense, then the evil talons of the Mountain Vulture closed upon her shoulder, and his hot breath scorched her neck.

"Try another trick like that, my beauty, and I'll slit your dainty throat from ear to ear! You've given me trouble enough, besides making me rub out my old side partner. Don't make the reckoning any heavier."

The Snow Sprite made no reply. That evil grasp seemed to crush her energies and blot out her courage.

Dirk Weeninx raised her in his arms and strode rapidly back to where he had left his horses. They were near the spot, being unable to move freely, thanks to the precautions he had taken, but had instinctively moved away from the dead outlaw, terrified by the scent of warm blood.

Weeninx bent over the prostrate form and coolly felt of it, to satisfy himself that no trace of life remained.

"You'll give no more trouble," he muttered, callously, rising erect and giving the corpse a careless kick. "It's the end I marked out for you from the beginning, though I didn't expect to polish you off quite so soon. I've read some-

where that love works wonders—but who ever thought that a fancy for a girl would make Ham Toplong turn and snap at *my* fingers!"

While muttering thus, the Mountain Vulture was not idle. He raised Sibyl from the ground and placed her astride the same horse ridden by the Wolf Queen. Then he passed the noose of a lasso around them both, drawing and knotting it tightly in place.

"Now, mind ye," he muttered, warningly. "No nonsense. If you try any tricks or make any attempt to give me the slip, one jerk on this rope will bring you up with a round turn, and like as not break your dainty neck in the bargain. You've got your warning."

He mounted the horse vacated by the murdered outlaw, holding fast to the free end of the lasso, and rode away from the blood-stained spot as rapidly as the darkness and the broken nature of the ground would admit.

Both Sibyl and Netawaka were conscious, and both fully realized the peril of their situation. They also knew that escape under the existing circumstances was almost impossible, yet neither of them despaired. Sooner or later an opportunity must present itself, and they held themselves in readiness to make the most of it.

Dark as was the night and intricate the way, Dirk Weeninx was never at a loss, but pushed steadily on to reach the den from which he and Toplong had ventured on their nefarious purpose some hours before.

He knew that close and persistent search would be made for the stolen maiden as soon as she was missed, but this troubled him but little. The retreat had been thoroughly tested on the former search. With his perfect knowledge of the rocky approaches, there was little danger of leaving a readable trail behind, even in the night.

For nearly two hours longer he rode steadily on, then drew rein and dismounted.

"We are at our journey's end for the present, my beauties," he said, an ugly chuckle supplementing his words. "I'll set your feet free, so you can walk, but I reckon I'll keep you on a string until we are safe inside."

Neither of his captives made any answer to this speech, but Dirk Weeninx cared little. He severed the thongs that bound their ankles, then lowered them from the saddle, leaving them still tied together by the lasso.

"Follow me, now, and see that you keep your heads low, unless you want some ugly bumps. The ceiling is not quite as high as it might be. Careful, now."

Without a word they yielded to the strain of the lasso, bowing low and following their captor through what appeared to be a long, low, crooked tunnel in the heart of the rocks.

"Steady now," came the voice of the Mountain Vulture, sounding hollow and unearthly in that underground den. "Stand still while I strike a light, and then you shall inspect our dainty bridal chamber. Ha! ha!"

It sounded like the laugh of a veritable demon, and both of the helpless maidens shuddered as they heard it. They knew now that they need look for no mercy at his hands.

Rapidly Dirk Weeninx worked. Kindlings

and an abundance of dry fuel had already been prepared, and but a few minutes elapsed ere a crackling blaze lighted up the gloomy den. With a laugh of exultation the Mountain Vulture raised his head to look upon his captives—but he beheld far more than he had anticipated.

"Throw up your hands, or I'll bore your brain with a brace of bullets!"

Clear and menacing rung out the words, emphasized by a pair of cocked and leveled revolvers, clasped by the hands of Dainty Lance as he stood in front of the two women, his brow bent, his eyes glowing sternly.

The face of the Mountain Vulture was the picture of amazement and dismay as he heard these words and recognized the young trapper. But only for a moment did he hesitate.

He believed that capture meant death, judging his enemy by himself. He saw that his brain was covered by both pistols. A single contraction of the finger would prove his death-warrant, yet he resolved to dare all—to make one desperate endeavor to retrieve his fortunes, trusting to luck to elude the avenging bullets.

Like a panther he strained his sinews for the leap—but too late. A dark form shot through the air, coming from the shadows behind him, and a heavy pistol-butt descended upon his head with crushing force. With a faint groan the Mountain Vulture fell forward upon his face, knocked senseless.

"Good enough, old boy!" cried Dainty Lance, as Hardy Zeph unbuckled the belt of weapons from around the waist of the fallen outlaw.

He said no more, for at the sound of his voice a glad cry came from Sibyl, and turning quickly, Dainty Lance clasped her to his breast, covering her face with passionate kisses.

Hardy Zeph looked as though he would dearly like to duplicate the performance, with Netawaka for a partner, but he contented himself with severing the rope that still bound the girls together, and removing the blanket from the head of his adored one. Then he cut the thongs from her wrists, and gaining courage from the example of his heart brother, the young trapper was on the point of claiming his reward, when Netawaka said, sharply:

"That dog is recovering; tie his hands, or he may give us trouble yet."

Dainty Lance was oblivious to all save his recovered love, and with a doleful sigh, the love-lorn trapper set about securing the Mountain Vulture with his own lasso.

The next few minutes will scarcely bear a close report, nor would it be exactly fair to give one. Let the reader imagine him or herself in the place of Dainty Lance or the Snow Sprite; let them remember under what circumstances they were torn apart, just after being solemnly betrothed; let them recall the trials each had undergone since that night, and then find fault if they can.

Netawaka was indulgent enough, though she was anxious to leave that spot for another where she believed they would be much safer when the hue and cry was raised, as it soon must be, but at length she was forced to interrupt the love scene.

"The night is growing old, and with the morning will come hot search for the Snow girl.

There is only one spot where she can safely hide; in the house of the Indian witch, old Kangewock."

"We can take these horses and be far away before they can strike our trail," said Dainty Lance, involuntarily shuddering at the idea of again visiting the place where he came so near meeting a most horrible death.

Netawaka whispered a few words in his ear. A glorious light irradiated his countenance, and a cry of surprised joy broke from his lips. The Wolf Queen placed one finger upon her lips, and Dainty Lance obeyed the mute caution, choking down the words that almost suffocated him.

"You folks go ahead," said Zeph, with a vicious glance at the now conscious outlaw. "I reckon I kin coax this critter not to give us any more trouble."

"No, he goes with us," said the Wolf Queen, decisively. "I claim him as my captive, and will punish him as I deem fit."

No one thought of disputing her word. Hardy Zeph made a noose in the free end of the lasso and fitted it around the neck of the Mountain Vulture. His arms remained bound, but his feet were set free, to enable him to walk.

The two horses were turned loose to wander at will, and then the party set out for the cavern where dwelt the Indian witch, there to lay low until the hot search for Sibyl should die away.

Under other circumstances it would have been a toilsome journey in the darkness, but now the hearts of all save one were beating rapidly with joy, and that made the trip a pleasant one.

The distance was not very great, and Netawaka led them by the shortest route, yet, sparing no pains to conceal their trail, knowing that keen eyes would soon be on the search for the stolen maiden.

The cavern reached, Dirk Weeninx was stowed away in a dark niche; then the Wolf Queen kindled a cheerful fire in the rock-chamber, from which old Kangewock had carried Dainty Lance to serve as a feast for her fero-cious pets.

Both Sibyl and Dainty Lance had in a measure taken the edge off their transports during the walk to the cave, and now both she and Netawaka were curious to learn how the young trappers came to put in such a dramatic appearance just in the nick of time.

Dainty Lance frankly admitted that as day after day crept by without Netawaka meeting him at the agreed upon rendezvous, he had begun to suspect her sincerity, and on that night the young trappers sallied forth from their retreat with the intention of entering the Indian town, to learn if possible whether Sibyl was an inmate.

While on their way they heard a pistol-shot not far from them, followed by a scream in a feminine voice. They stole forward to investigate the matter, reaching the spot just as Dirk Weeninx mounted the horse so lately ridden by the comrade he had murdered.

They divined the truth so far as Sibyl was concerned, but, owing to the darkness and the disguising blanket, they took Netawaka for Ham

Toplong, and feared to make an attack then, lest Sibyl should be injured in the gloom. They dogged the outlaw to his retreat, only learning the whole truth when he aided his fair captives to alight. His speech gave them the desired clew, and, silently following him into the den, they took the scoundrel completely by surprise.

His explanation consumed much greater space than is afforded it here, and at the end Netawaka arose, saying:

"The White Wolf has richly earned the punishment I have in store for him. He is too evil to live any longer."

She glided through the passage, lighted by the torch Hardy Zeph carried. A cry of amazement parted her lips as she paused before the spot where Dirk had been left.

CHAPTER XI. TRACKED TO DEATH.

DIRK WEEWINX was gone!

Upon the rocky floor of the little niche in which he had been stowed away, as all believed in perfect security, lay the bonds with which he had been confined.

With an exclamation that sounded suspiciously like a curse, Hardy Zeph snatched up the fragments.

"He sawed his hands loose on that p'int o' rock thar—you kin see the blood whar he broke the skin!"

"He'll make for the horses we left," uttered Dainty Lance. "We'll hear from the rascal again before all's ended."

"White Wolf has taken his last ride on mortal horse—he will never give you trouble," said the Wolf Queen, with a peculiar intonation that startled even Hardy Zeph.

She placed one hand to her lips and uttered a long, quavering cry. From far away in the bowels of the hollow mountain there came a chorus of howls and yelping barks, then followed a rapid patter of feet and from the blackness beyond a full score of wolves emerged, headed by the huge black, Tarkio.

"White Wolf has not had time to go far," said Netawaka, caressing the head of the black wolf as it fawned upon her. "In the darkness we couldn't follow his trail, and he could laugh our efforts to scorn; but here are noses as true and deadly as that of the purest bloodhound. White Wolf has fairly started upon the trail of death!"

"You mean to hunt him down with those wolves?" asked Dainty Lance, while the Snow Sprite hid her eyes with an involuntary shudder of horror.

"If we let him go he would dare all for revenge. He would tell the White Medicine where *she* is hiding. Go back to the fire with the Snow-girl. Talk and think of pleasant things. Go—I am losing time."

"I'm going 'long with you," said Hardy Zeph, with the dogged earnestness peculiar to him when he was bound to have his own way. "That old coon is p'izen nasty, an' he'll fight hard once you git him cornered."

The Wolf Queen laughed proudly as she glanced around upon her four-footed servants. No man lived who could successfully do battle

with them all, when once her voice urged them to the attack.

Hardy Zeph gazed upon her admiringly, his mouth fairly watering, his heart on fire. To him it was a glorious spectacle as she stood in her physical beauty, the center of the group of wild, four-footed worshipers.

Not so to Dainty Lance. A cold thrill, almost of aversion crept over him, and drawing Sibyl closer to his side, he turned and retraced his steps to the rock chamber.

Netawaka delayed no longer. One by one, beginning with Tarkio, she made the wolves smell of the spot where the Mountain Vulture had lain, of the ropes and the blood-stained point of rock, the while muttering low words in a tongue unintelligible to Hardy Zeph, but which the wolves seemed fully to comprehend. Then she rose up and waved her hand along the narrow passage leading to the outer world, uttering a single sharp cry.

Tarkio, the others close at his heels, glided away, a low, menacing howl breaking from his throat.

"Come!" cried the Wolf Queen, her eyes blazing, her voice ringing clear as a clarion. "The man-hunt has fairly begun! The trail of death lies before us!"

No less excited, Hardy Zeph obeyed, keeping close to her heels, both emerging from the hollow hill and racing through the darkness, over the broken ground, after the pack of wolves. The fierce creatures howled and yelped as though they scented a bloody feast in the distance. Only gaunt Tarkio was silent. He ran with his nose close to the ground, lifting the trail as surely as could the purest bred bloodhound. Woe be unto the fugitive unless he could break his trail in running water, or otherwise throw that grisly pack off his track!

He had improved his time to the utmost, but only a few minutes had elapsed since he worked loose his bands and emerged from the cavern, a free man. He knew that his escape must be discovered ere long, when hot and bitter pursuit would be made, and he strained his powers to the utmost, racing through the rocky region at a speed that more than once came near proving fatal. But from each fall he arose and plunged on, unheeding his bruises, for he knew that his life hung in the balance. Alone, unarmed, to be overtaken by those whom he had wronged would mean death. If once he could reach the den where he had been captured, and could find one of the horses turned loose by his enemies, then he might laugh at further pursuit.

"Let me once shake them off, and I'll be myself again," he mentally ejaculated as he pressed on through the gloom, already growing less as the moon began to overtop the rocky range. "I can manage to pick up weapons somewhere—those I left on Ham Toplong, perhaps—and then I'll give those infernal boys a new deal!"

Dirk Weeninx came to an abrupt pause, his heart leaping into his throat chokingly. An articulate cry parted his lips. In that moment he suffered all the agonies of the most frightful death.

From the gloom behind him came that wild chorus of howls, yelps and snarling cries—the sounds of a wolf-pack in full cry upon the trail

of game that instinct tells them is unable to escape them either by fight or flight.

Many a time the wretch had heard similar sounds without feeling any particular alarm; but then he had stout comrades, was well mounted or fortified, and always with good and serviceable weapons ready to his grasp. But now! Already he felt the skeleton fingers of death closing upon him.

"That girl—she set her pack of wolves upon my trail—they'll run me down and tear me to pieces!"

The words fell gaspingly from his lips. His stout frame trembled in every fiber, his limbs grew weak and threatened to give way beneath his weight.

But only for a moment. Life was dear to him, as it is to all of us. He knew that by speedy flight alone could he hope to be saved, and collecting his energies he plunged on through the night at breakneck speed.

A long and desperate spurt, heading for the den where he had been captured in the very flight of his triumph, then he paused to catch breath and listen to those wild, weird sounds from the gloom behind him.

A gasping groan of angry despair rose in his throat. That diabolical chorus sounded clearer and nearer. The wolf-pack had gained considerably upon him, despite his strenuous efforts.

"I can't make the den—there's no water near to break my trail—I am doomed!" he panted, in abject despair; but there came a rapid change. "I'll not die running like a dog. I'll give them a fight first. If they want my life, they've got to pay my price!"

All traces of terror had vanished like magic. The Mountain Vulture, knowing that further flight would be worse than useless—since it could only weaken him and render him an easier victim when overtaken, as he must soon be—looked around him for a favorable position in which to stand at bay and sell his life as dearly as possible.

The round moon had risen above the rocky ridge, and now cast a silvery light over the barren waste.

A huge square mass of rock was standing near. Upon its top the hunted man believed he could make a good fight, against the wolves, at least.

"If I can beat them off until the others come up, maybe I can make terms with them."

It was a forlorn hope at best, but Dirk Weeninx saw in it his only hope. Working rapidly he collected a lot of stones and tossed them upon the rock, then, as the wild chorus of the wolves came nearer, he climbed up the nearly perpendicular face of the boulder, and lay down flat.

Still leading, black Tarkio shot across the moonlighted space like a four-footed arrow, a loud, exultant yell bursting from his red jaws as he launched himself against the side of the rock upon which his prey had sought refuge.

Dirk Weeninx nerved himself for the death-grapple. In each hand he clutched a heavy stone, ready to beat out the brains of the first wolf that should show its head above the edge of the rock.

But the anticipated assault did not come just then.

From the distance came a clear, peculiar cry. Instantly the wild clamor of the wolves ceased. Then a single note—long-drawn and lugubrious—came from below. A moment's pause, then the howl was repeated.

Dirk Weeninx crested his head and peered down from his refuge. He saw the wolves squatting upon their haunches, completely surrounding the rock. He saw one—a huge, jet-black monster—elevate his nose and repeat that mournful howl; and he knew that it was summoning his human enemies.

A few moments later they appeared, Netawaka and Hardy Zeph.

He cried aloud to them, offering to surrender quietly, if only they would call off those accursed wolves.

"You have earned death a thousand times over," sternly replied the Wolf Queen. "You are not fit to live. You have five minutes to make your peace with Heaven—then you die!"

Instead of praying, the Mountain Vulture cursed and raved. Even Hardy Zeph turned sick at heart.

"Let me give him a bullet," he muttered, hoarsely.

"No—I have doomed him—his punishment shall be carried out," sternly cried the Wolf Queen, her hand upon his arm.

A clear cry issued from her lips. The hungry wolves leaped forward and upward. Wild howls and shrieks and curses rent the air as the Mountain Vulture battled for his life.

The moon hid her face behind a cloud. Then silence.

The trail of death was ended!

CHAPTER XII.

AN INTERRUPTED WEDDING.

THE new day was just dawning when the Wolf Queen and Hardy Zeph, escorted by their four-footed body-guard, headed by grim old Tarkio, reached the cavern on their return from the trail of death.

Sibyl was sleeping, worn out by the trials and fatigue which had been hers on that eventful night, but Dainty Lance was awake and waiting their return.

A single interchange of glances with Hardy Zeph was enough. Dainty Lance drew a long breath of relief, for he now knew that the Mountain Vulture would never more hover around to swoop down upon his gentle dove. He asked no questions, nor did either of the others volunteer any particulars. It was enough that the work was done.

Besides, other thoughts were of more moment to Dainty Lance just then. He recalled the words the Wolf Queen had breathed in his ear while in the den where Dirk Weeninx was captured. A glance showed him that Sibyl was sleeping too soundly to be disturbed by their voices, and he addressed Netawaka.

"Please tell me what you meant by the words you whispered in my ear last night—before we came here."

"I said that neither you nor the Snow-girl would be safe from the pursuit of the White Medicine until you were man and wife," promptly responded Netawaka.

"And you added that if I would trust all to

you, we could be married before another sunset," hastily said Lance.

"I did; and I meant all I said," was the prompt response. "I knew that this would be the safest place for you while the hunt for her lasted. No one of my tribe would dare cross the entrance to this cavern, for fear of old Kangewock. They fear her as they fear the evil spirit. Besides, they all know how bitterly she hates all who belong to the race of pale-faces. They do not know how badly hurt she is, how feeble and helpless since that black night."

"Admitting that," somewhat impatiently interposed Dainty Lance, "how can we be married and so soon?"

"To-day a white priest, a missionary among my people to the North, will be brought into the village where the Snow-girl lived. White Medicine sent for him, meaning to marry her to the young chief, Shooting Star, and then build up an impassable barrier between you two."

"And you can—you will bring him here?" eagerly cried Dainty Lance, his face flushing, his eyes aglow with ardent love.

"All will be excitement at the village, over the strange disappearance of the Snow-girl. The priest will be forgotten. I will enter the village and tell him all, only keeping the knowledge of the place where you are hiding from him until I am sure he will not betray us. When he learns the truth, he surely will not hesitate. Then I will lead him here, and you two will be made one—and my pledge will be kept."

"Twon't take much longer to hitch two couple than it will one," said Hardy Zeph, a pleading light in his eyes.

The Wolf Queen looked at him steadily for a moment, and seemed about to speak, but then she shook her head and glided away, leaving poor Zeph feeling very despondent.

"Wait until the priest comes; then try her again, old fellow," said Dainty Lance, encouragingly.

Everything looked so bright and rose-colored to him just then, that he could not help giving his heart-brother some encouragement. Ignorant of the powerful motives which had influenced the actions of the Wolf Queen ever since their first meeting, Dainty Lance believed Hardy Zeph had made a favorable impression on the forest Amazon. Not an inkling of the truth had she suffered to escape her.

"Ef she does say yes, I don't reckon thar'll be two happier beavers in this hull world than you an' me, Lance!" muttered the young trapper, his eyes aglow, his voice unsteady from strong emotion.

Netawaka busied herself preparing breakfast, a meal to which one and all, not excepting the Snow Sprite, did ample justice. Love and good roast meat are not incompatible, let the romantic poets say what they may.

"Take your time, and tell her what we have agreed upon," Netawaka found opportunity to say to Dainty Lance when the meal was ended. "Do it quietly—she is wild and shy as a fawn. Frighten her at the start, and you will have your work all to do over again."

"You are going, then?"

"Yes. It may take time to win over the priest. I must work cautiously too. Let us once arouse suspicion, and our scalps would leave their resting-places in a hurry."

Sibyl turned toward Dainty Lance, and the Wolf Queen said no more, but completed her preparations for the really perilous mission on which she was bound.

"You kin rig me out as a Injun," said Hardy Zeph, wistfully. "Let me go long with you. Then, ef you're found out, I kin kiver your retreat."

"At the cost of your own life?"

"That don't matter. I never sot a very high val'e onto it, an' ef anything crossways should happen to you, I'll sell out my pile for jest one stout lick at them as did the mischief."

"Your company would only increase my danger—but I thank you all the same," said the Wolf Queen, her voice softer than usual as her brown hand clasped the paw of the young trapper. "You must stay here. Keep a close watch from the cave entrance, but do not expose yourself. If the enemy comes, retreat to the wild beast den. There are only my wolves there, and they will not hurt you."

Without giving time for further pleading, the Wolf Queen turned and glided away. Hardy Zeph followed her to the mouth of the cavern, only averting his gaze when her form was hidden from view among the scattered rocks.

Dainty Lance found his task an easier one than either Netawaka or himself had dared hope. The Snow Sprite proved herself a sensible girl when it comes down to practical details.

"You shall decide for me," she murmured, hiding her flushed face in the bosom of her lover. "Father said that he would never rest until an insurmountable barrier was raised between us—that I should marry the young chief. He meant it, too; but—is it not a poor rule that will not work both ways?"

As she softly uttered these words, Sibyl glanced shyly up into the beaming face of the young trapper. And then—

Those who cannot guess the answer Dainty Lance gave deserve to be left forever in the darkness of ignorance.

Slowly the hours move on; slowly even to the lovers, who hardly durst hope that perfect bliss was to be theirs, even though it hovered almost within their grasp; but slowest of all to Hardy Zeph, who faithfully maintained the position assigned him by the Wolf Queen. Noon came and passed. The afternoon was drawing to a close when the keen-eyed trapper caught sight of two persons approaching on foot.

A brief period of doubt, then he recognized the Wolf Queen. With her was an aged man whose form was bowed, whose scanty locks of hair were white as the undriven snow.

"It's her an' the preacher-man. Good Lawd! ef she'd only say *yes!*!" muttered Zeph, as he hastened to carry the glad tidings to those even more nearly interested.

Dainty Lance and Sibyl met them at the entrance. The hand of fate was in it. The bright sunlight shone upon their forms as they stood

upon the ledge; only for a few moments—but long enough.

"Back into the cave!" cried Netawaka, with a keen glance around them. "Every brave of the tribe is out hunting for the Snow girl. If an evil eye should fall upon you, we are all lost!"

She could see no suspicious signs. All around seemed deserted of human life. And then they passed into the cave.

The priest, a venerable Canadian, drew the lovers aside and briefly questioned them. Netawaka had told him the whole story while on the way, and already half convinced, it was an easy matter to set his remaining doubts at rest.

Hardy Zeph, his earnest love revealed in the light of his honest eyes, drew nearer to the Wolf Queen. She read his purpose, and an expression of regret overspread her countenance. She knew that his love for her was strong and whole-souled, that he was laying a heart of gold at her feet; but she knew, too, that she would be wronging him by giving him further hope. Long ago her heart had gone out to the handsome young chief, Shooting Star. She could not transfer it, even to such a deserving object.

"'Tain't but a little word—you kin say it ef you try," said Hardy Zeph, softly, humbly. "I'll die but you'll never hev cause to be sorry. It's the best love of a honest man I'm layin' at your feet. Won't you pick it up?"

There were tears dimming the brightness of the Wolf Queen's eyes as she slowly shook her head.

"I am sorry—my heart was given away before you came, or my answer might have been different. Be my friend—my dear brother, instead, and stooping, the forest Amazon pressed her lips softly to his forehead.

"No 'fense, I hope?" muttered Zeph, a ghastly smile distorting his pale face. "Reckon I'd better go see they ain't no snakes snoopin' 'round. Let 'em git hitched, all the same. I don't feel jest like a weddin' party."

He turned and hastened to the mouth of the cave.

Dainty Lance caught his last words and understood their meaning after one glance into the face of the Wolf Queen. He realized what a terrible blow had been dealt his comrade by his own feelings, and a brief cloud shaded his brow.

"If I could, I would have spoken different," said Netawaka, answering his mute question, smiling faintly. "Love does not always go where it is bidden, else *you* would not be so happy at this moment."

Dainty Lance felt deeply for his heart-brother, but he was young, the maiden of his choice stood beside him, the venerable priest, all doubts satisfactorily solved, was ready to pronounce the words that would make them one in the sight of Heaven and man, and it was against nature for him to be long downcast.

Netawaka stooped her proud head and pressed her red lips to the fair brow of the Snow Sprite.

"I will act as both father and mother to you this day, little one. Be brave. He loves you, and is deserving of your perfect trust. The sooner the words are spoken that give you wholly to him, the better."

Side by side the handsome couple stood before

the venerable man of God, as he began the service that was fated to be ended in bloodshed and death.

A strange mist before his usually keen eyes, Hardy Zeph stood at the cave entrance. Dark forms were stealing among the thick lying boulders—evil eyes riveted upon his figure—but he saw them not. Nearer they crept, still unobserved, until the leader, tall and stately, handsome of face but just now looking like a demon of vengeance, rose up and bent his bow. The arrow was sped, but Hardy Zeph caught the motion, and swiftly dodged.

Shrill yells rung out—the war-cry of the Plain Crees!

"Injuns!" shouted Hardy Zeph, rushing to warn his friends.

Startled by the wild yells, the priest faltered and paused.

"Go on!" sternly commanded Dainty Lance. "Once my wife, only death can take her from me! Go on!"

CHAPTER XIII.

FACE TO FACE.

IT was a curious and impressive scene.

Pale-faced and trembling the Snow Sprite clung to the arm of her lover, almost husband, whose unoccupied hand was drawing and cocking a revolver. The venerable missionary was staring around in the direction from whence came those wild, diabolical yells. Hardy Zeph was standing before Dainty Lance and his bride, both hands armed, stern defiance upon his rugged countenance and blazing in his eyes. The Wolf Queen had started toward the cave entrance, hastily stringing her bow.

"Go on—finish your duty, father!" sternly repeated Dainty Lance, but even as the words left his lips he saw that the golden opportunity had passed.

The wild yells rung out nearer. The rapid trampling of many feet could be heard echoing from the rocky floor of the passage. In another breath the bloodthirsty enemy would be upon them, when naught could save the day but desperate battling against the odds.

Dainty Lance raised the Snow Sprite in his arms as though she was an infant and darted back from the circle of light cast by the torches and crackling fire.

"Wait here, my darling—lie close and do not move until I come back," he hurriedly uttered as he deposited his terrified burden in a little niche where the projecting walls of rock would effectually protect her person from all flying missiles.

One warm kiss upon her cold brow, then he turned and rushed back to the rock chamber where the dread battle of life and death was fated to be fought.

"Shoulder to shoulder!" he grated sternly as he placed himself beside Hardy Zeph, pistols cocked and ready for use. "Not one must pass by. She shall never fall into their hands."

"Not while I'm alive and kickin'," came the prompt response. "Yer' the p'izen imps come!"

With a clear, triumphant yell the leader of

the assailants bounded through the narrow entrance and landed fairly within the fire-lighted chamber, stopping short in evident surprise at the unexpected vision which met his gaze.

It was Shooting Star, chief of the Plain Crees, bold, handsome as an archangel; but a spirit as imperious, a nature as dauntless confronted him now.

"Stop! one step further and you die!" cried the Wolf Queen, her strong bow bending until the arrow was drawn to its barbed head. "What seek you here?"

For an instant the stern expression of the young chief softened, and a look of wondering admiration chased the war-light from his black eyes, but it was only for the moment. He recognized the child of the Indian witch, old Kangewock—but beyond her his eyes rested upon the defiant forms of the two pale-faces, and he knew that they must be the ones of whom the Mad Hermit had spoken, that one of the twain must be his favored rival.

His worst passions flashed up and gained the ascendancy again, the venomous light came into his eyes once more.

"You are a squaw. Shooting Star does not do battle with such. Stand aside that a chief may look upon the cowardly white faces who wear the shape of warriors, but who hide behind the petticoats of a squaw in fear and trembling when they hear the footsteps of a man and warrior!"

"Duck your head, and I'll plug the dirty cuss through an' through!" grated Hardy Zeph, his "mad" up.

But this was not what the Wolf Queen wanted. She knew that a death-grapple could not long be averted. She loved the young chief madly, but her sympathies were all with the pale-faces. She knew that they were in bitter earnest, and that before Shooting Star could reach them, a revolver bullet would lay him low in death.

It was an awkward dilemma, and she was not given much time for thought.

Shooting Star strode swiftly forward, his arm extended as though to brush her from his path.

At the same moment her bow twanged—the arrow sped upon its mission of death, burying its length feather-deep in a broad, bronzed bosom—not that of the young chief, but of one of his followers. Then, quick as thought, she leaped forward and clasped the astounded warrior in her arms, her legs interlocked with his, her wonderful strength exerted to the utmost.

Taken wholly by surprise at this bold attack from a squaw, Shooting Star lost his balance and fell backward, his unprotected head striking with terrible force against the side wall as he toppled over. His muscles relaxed and a gasping groan parted his lips. For the time being he was altogether out of the fight.

Hardy Zeph sprung to her assistance, but his aid was not needed. The Wolf Queen leaped up and grasped her bow, while a clear cry issued from her lips—the same signal that had not long since summoned the pack of wolves from their den to take the trail of the fleeing Mountain Vulture.

All this had transpired with the rapidity of thought. The body of the warrior, whose heart

had been cloven in twain by the Wolf Queen's arrow, scarcely touched the rock floor ere Shooting Star was overthrown and rendered helpless.

A wild yell of fury was blended with the swiftly succeeding pistol-shots as the young trappers opened fire upon the crowd of dusky forms—and the death-grapple was begun.

It was a thrilling yet horrible scene. The pencil might give some faint idea of its details; not so the pen.

A score against three—thus the battle opened.

A sheet of red flame seemed to hedge around both Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph, so rapidly were their revolvers worked, one in each hand. Yet they were not firing aimlessly. Their blood was boiling, on fire with the terrible hatred that is born of such moments, but their nerves were steady and like tempered steel. Each bullet found its mark. With each report there came a death-yell, a groan, or involuntary cry of pain from the lips of a wounded warrior.

Standing over the prostrate form of Shooting Star, the Wolf Queen nobly seconded the desperate efforts of her pale-faced allies. Rapidly her bow-string twanged. Sharply the feathered shafts hissed, carrying death at their keen points.

And then, with gallant Tarkio at their head, the wolf-clan rushed through the chamber and plunged into the *melee*.

It was full time.

The revolvers of the young trappers were empty. The surviving Indians were pressing them bitterly. They were wounded in many places, and were rapidly growing weak from loss of blood. They had performed wonders. Dead and wounded red-skins lay around them in piles, forming a terribly significant barricade. Their feet slipped in pools of warm, slimy blood. Fighting with knives and clubbed pistols, they stood shoulder to shoulder, forced back against the wall. Another minute of such fearful work—

Then came the charge of the faithful wolf-pack.

Old Tarkio seized the foremost, a huge warrior whose hatchet was quivering above the head of Dainty Lance. His pointed jaws closed upon the brawny throat. His long teeth pierced the jugular veins and the hot blood gurgled down his throat as the death-doomed savage reeled and fell backward.

One or two of the warriors managed to turn and flee, but the wolves were snarling and snapping at their heels, leaping upon and pulling them down one by one. Human foes might have shown them mercy; not so these hairy assailants. To fall meant death!

The death-grapple was ended, but at what a fearful cost!

Weak and dizzy the boy trappers wiped the blood from their eyes and stared painfully around them.

The rock chamber was filled with sulphurous smoke, and surrounding objects could be but indistinctly seen.

There lay the man of God, his white hair dabbed in blood. A tomahawk had almost cloven his skull in twain.

Beyond was Netawaka, no longer erect. She lay like one dead, her arms over the head and face of Shooting Star, as though even in death she would protect him from harm.

Near by lay a huge warrior. One hand still clutched the haft of a knife, the blade of which was buried in the bosom of his young chief—an accidental blow as he fell, slain outright.

A gasping cry broke from Hardy Zeph as he noted the motionless form of the Wolf Queen. Staggering from weakness, blood streaming from a dozen wounds, he crossed over and fell by her side, senseless or dead, Dainty Lance knew not which.

A bloody blur was before his own eyes. His limbs gave way beneath him as he strove to step away from the wall. Strange forms danced before him—he saw Sibyl—the Mad Hermit—the negro giant—surely he was dying! This was the wild phantasmagoria— Ha! A deep voice rung in his ears—the voice that he had last heard in bitter mockery at that dread betrothal feast—the voice of the Mad Hermit!

A desperate effort—then he fell forward, like one dead!

CHAPTER XIV.

A WONDROUS REVELATION.

AMONG many others, the Mad Hermit and Hercules, the giant negro, were out searching for the missing Snow Sprite. They were some distance away when Shooting Star discovered the refuge of the missing girl, but near enough to hear the wild yell which followed the arrow shot at Hardy Zeph. A glance in that direction showed them the young chief and his followers entering the cavern of the Indian witch, and divining the truth, they made all possible haste to reach the spot.

The hermit entered first, only to stagger back as one of the fierce wolves leaped upon him. Hercules leaped to the rescue with his mighty club, one blow of which hurled the creature aside, nearly every bone in its body broken.

A second and a third met a like fate, and then the others slunk away into a side passage, leaving the way clear.

It was no illusion, but really the voice of the Mad Hermit that rung in the ears of Dainty Lance—a cry of wondering horror, followed by the name of the Snow Sprite.

Sibyl heard the voice, also, but she had already left her retreat, unable longer to endure the horrible torture of suspense. She thought not of recapture—she thought only of the youth whom she loved so dearly.

The Mad Hermit started forward with a cry of strangely mingled joy and anger as the Snow Sprite entered the rock chamber, but she eluded his grasp and flung herself upon the motionless, death-like form of the young trapper. A wailing sob welled from her throat as she raised his blood-covered head to her bosom, and forgetful of all else, she pressed her pale lips repeatedly to his—but alas! there came no answering pressure.

Uttering an angry curse the Mad Hermit grasped her and thrust the senseless form from her arms.

As he did so, his eyes rested upon the form of the old priest, and a terrible change swept over his countenance.

For a moment he reeled unsteadily, and with a cry of alarm, Hercules put out his huge arm to support him. But the old man as quickly recovered himself and refused the proffered aid. Almost rudely he shook Sibyl and forced her eyes to meet his, uttering hoarsely:

“Tell me—are you married to *him*?”

A sobbing moan was the only response. The poor girl was nearly dead with grief and horror.

“Girl, listen to me,” cried the hermit, almost savagely. “What I tell you now is the truth—I swear it by the grave of your mother! Go down upon your knees and thank Heaven that you have been spared from committing a horrible sin, for as I live, yonder man—Lancelot Daintree—is your own brother!”

Sibyl stared into his eyes wildly. Then a piercing shriek parted her lips, followed by a hollow laugh, a laugh that caused the Mad Hermit to tremble with an awful fear—the fear that his loved child had gone mad!

“The boy ain’t dead, boss,” muttered Hercules, handling his blood-stained club significantly. “Bes’ let me make shore dat he don’t make no more trouble—a little tap on de head with dis club—”

The hermit made no reply, but hearing Sibyl still laughing low and vacantly, he strode out of the cave of death, followed by the mighty negro.

A month crept slowly by. The rock chamber presented a very different appearance from what it did when the curtain last fell upon it.

Before the fire are gathered four forms well known to the reader, each one bearing traces of that fearful death-grapple. Dainty Lance, Hardy Zeph, the Wolf Queen and the young chief, Shooting Star.

The latter had just come in and was making his report.

“I followed their trail far to the south. They joined a big wagon train. They did not see me, but I entered their camp and learned what you wanted to know. The train is bound for California, to the gold mines.”

“She was well?” hoarsely demanded Dainty Lance. “You saw her?”

“Yes. She seemed well, but her face was white as snow, and her voice sounded like one whose heart is dead.”

“To-morrow we set out for California, Zeph. She is my wife—only death can keep us apart!” sternly said Dainty Lance, his eyes filled with a steely light.

And on the morrow the parting came. More eyes than one were moistened. The Wolf Queen had nursed them back from the very jaws of death. In doing so she won her reward. Shooting Star thought no more of the Snow Sprite, for he had found one far more fitted to keep his lodge warm.

“It was too much happiness for me—I see that now,” said Hardy Zeph, huskily, his eyes dimmed. “May you live long an’ be happy—good-by!”

And then he turned and hastened after his heart brother.

THE END.

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